How to Conduct MLA Oral History Interviews

Version 1.1 / Rob DeLand (updated 5-4-2015)

MLA Oral History interviews are a valuable way of documenting the history and accomplishments of MLA and its members. Oral histories are surprisingly easy to conduct, and it’s very rewarding to capture stories that very likely would go undocumented otherwise. The hardest part is just getting started – selecting the interviewee, and setting a date. There are a few basic details which the interviewer should think through for a successful interview, and it is the goal of this paper to spell out those details and leave the reader with the confidence that (s)he needs to conduct a successful oral history interview.

Oral history resources are readily available in books and online. A typical list of resources may be viewed at the Chicago Area Archivists Oral History page (http://www.chicagoarchivists.org/oralhistory) and there are many other lists of this type. If you haven’t conducted an oral history interview before, you might find it helpful to read one of the books on the subject, such as Doing Oral History by Donald Ritchie, or Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History (5 contributing authors). A look at either table of contents will help you decide whether you feel the need to explore any of the topics listed.

The MLA Oral History committee tends to conduct audio-only interviews. Video interviews usually require a second person to run the camera, and can make it harder for the interviewee to get comfortable (but not necessarily – if you have the desire and resources, go for it!). We recommend that you get a good quality digital audio recorder (such as a ZOOM H2 – check online), set it on a table between the interviewer and interviewee, and simply leave it untouched during the interview. Other options are possible if a stand-alone recorder is not available – please contact the MLA Oral History Committee if this is an issue for you.

Conducting MLA Oral Histories at the chapter level

The MLA Oral History Committee encourages every chapter to identify a contact person to coordinate oral history interviews in their region. That person should keep track of interviews that have been conducted, and push to get them transcribed and published (in your chapter newsletter, for instance); maintain a list of interviews that the chapter wishes to conduct; identify chapter members who are willing to conduct interviews, push for new interviews to be conducted; and make sure that completed interviews are forwarded to the MLA Archives at the University of Maryland. This may sound like a lot, but it doesn’t all have to be done at the same time. Again, the most important part is just getting started.

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**Determine who to interview**

The MLA Oral History committee focuses on interviewing past MLA office holders and others known widely to the music library community. We often need local help to interview someone who has not been interviewed, and we would love to have your help. MLA chapters might also want to seek those who have been influential in their chapters such as chapter organizers or renowned librarians in your area.

**Prepare your list of interview questions**

The MLA Oral History committee maintains a list of recommended questions for an MLA oral history interview. Please have a look at this list, and add or drop questions as you see fit for your own oral history interviews.

**Interview Checklist**

A) Prepare for your interview. Learn as much as you can about the person and their institution, as it applies to the interview. Ask the interviewee for a CV or resume, as appropriate. If possible, send the questions 1-2 weeks in advance.

B) A day before the interview, check your recording equipment. Make sure you have fully-charged batteries (and a spare set of batteries). Just before the interview, test that the recorded audio quality and levels are good. You may want to connect a pair of ear-buds and have just one in your ear during the interview to be sure levels are good and the recording isn’t cutting out.

C) Identify a quiet indoor location for the interview, with as few interruptions as possible.

D) Put the interviewee at ease: review your list of questions with them, explain how you plan to conduct the interview (with as few audible cues as possible, for instance) and answer any questions before the interview begins.

E) Begin the interview audio by stating your name, the date and location of the interview, and the interviewee’s name; then proceed with your questions. If possible, limit the interview to segments of less than 80 minutes, so they are easy to convert to audio CDs when finished.

F) 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. This will help yield a more polished finished product that can be easily excerpted for other purposes later on.

G) Have the interviewee sign the MLA Oral History release form. Provide them with a copy.
H) Bring a camera, and ask the interviewee for a photograph, ideally with the interviewer.

I) Be sure to create backup copies of the interview audio ASAP after the interview. Plan to send a copy of the audio to the MLA archives in Maryland (see below).

J) Try to have your interview transcribed in a timely manner – ideally within a month or so. Ask the interviewee if (s)he wants to be a part of the editing process, or to have approval over the results. If transcription is a problem for you, please contact the MLA Oral History committee for suggestions (see below). In addition to a transcript, a table of contents and a list of names mentioned can also be helpful, as well as a list of questions about anything that needs to be clarified, like unintelligible words. The table of contents can simply be a running list of topics discussed and may or may not include timings. Have transcripts proofread by somebody other than the transcriber. This person may also create the table of contents.

K) There are several options for transcribing. Our best results have been done in-house using a USB foot controller to start and stop the audio while editing is done in a separate word processor window.

One contributor to this document stated the following: “We have tried a variety of approaches, including transcription services (too expensive) independent professional transcribers (meh…) and automatic transcription software (NOT GOOD), and found that graduate students do the best work for our purposes. They really know the material and aren’t apt to make mistakes with musical terms and composers’ names. They are also tech-savvy.”

L) Gather together the appropriate items to be forwarded to the MLA archives after the interview and transcription are completed:
   1) CV / resume of interviewee
   2) MLA Oral History release form signed by interviewer and interviewee
   3) CD audio of interview (optional: MP3 reduction of same)
   4) Photograph of interviewee
   5) Unedited transcription of the interview (and edited transcription if available)

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

Thanks to all who contributed to this document!