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Kentucky Museum seeks music memorabilia for upcoming exhibit

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Local music legends Tommy Starr (from left) and Kenny Lee work with Logan Johnson to scan ephemera related to the southcentral Kentucky n

Provided by Tiffany Isselhardt

That Polaroid sitting in your attic from a night out in the 80s might actually belong in a museum.

Curators are seeking community contributions to complete an upcoming Kentucky Museum exhibit exploring musical heritage of the surrounding region.

“Sonic Landscapes” will open in 2025 and cover nearly a century of live and recorded music history, from blues and gospel to bluegrass and rap.

Tiffany Isselhardt, exhibits curator and development coordinator for the museum, said “everything and anything” could prove valuable to the exhibit, but what they really want are items with a personal story attached.

“I want the crowd surfing pictures, I want the pictures of you and your friends getting a little tipsy at the bar and having a good time,” Isselhardt said. “We also want things like matchbooks and coasters, T-shirts, memorabilia from musicians' times on the road or hanging out in the studio.”

The exhibit will primarily explore stories from the 1940s to the 1990s, featuring oral histories from musicians, record store owners, studio owners and fans.

“It's more than audio and video — music is a very sensory experience, but it can also be a very tangible experience,” Isselhardt said. “That's where the call (for donations) comes in.”

The museum's website lists venues and businesses they'd like to collect more on, including the Quonset Auditorium of Bowling Green, Lost River Cave Nite Club, Picasso's, Tidball's, Rocky's, Mellow Matt's and more.

Isselhardt said those interested in contributing have the option of donating to the collection outright or loaning items for a roughly five-year period.

In the event that the exhibit runs longer, contributors will be notified and can decide if they'd like their items returned.

They can also request certain items be digitally scanned, allowing the museum to use the object without needing the original copy.

Brent Bjorkman, the museum's director, said they've already begun collecting many stories in the region. He compared the work to a "family tree" — one musician inspires another, who inspires another, and so on.

"What this is going to help us do is put the leaves on that tree and add to the branches of this tree to fill that out," Bjorkman said.

Isselhardt said they also hope to feature a model home recording studio from the 1970s, similar to what was used by many independent musicians at the time.

“A lot of us, even my generation, we had Napster, we had the internet — you got on a computer and started working on (music),” Isselhardt said. “What was it like before the availability of computers to have to sit in a studio and record? There are entire generations right now who have no idea how you would produce music without the aid of the digital world.”

She added the exhibit is a chance to preserve many historical items currently gathering dust in people’s homes before they are lost to time.

“It’s a call to make sure that we never forget that these places and these people and these moments actually happened and that we’re here,” Isselhardt said. “Hopefully, not only will this exhibit mean a whole lot to a whole lot of people, but someday, when our kids or our grandkids look back at us, they can remember that, ‘hey, we were here too.’ ”

Chris Carmichael is an independent music arranger and a lifelong musician featured in the exhibit. He has spent over 40 years arranging scores for musicians across the globe as well as playing in groups of his own.

Carmichael was quick to donate his ephemera to the museum, including posters and memorabilia from local establishments. He also submitted handwritten scores he arranged for artists like Taylor Swift, Buddy Guy and Sheryl Crow.

He got his start in music playing violin and went on to accompany musicians like Martina McBride and Billy Joe Shaver while also contributing to movie soundtracks and other works.

He said moving to Bowling Green in 1975 introduced him to a new mix of influences that still impact him, especially in regards to bluegrass and country. He said “Sonic Landscape” will be an ambitious and difficult undertaking, but an important one.

“It will begin to try to tell the story of who influenced who,” Carmichael said. “All these seemingly different influences are really connected on some level.”

Carmichael said he was personally influenced by his violin studies at Western Kentucky University. He added WKU served as a magnet for many musicians, both those seeking an education and those seeking a college crowd to perform for.

The influence of WKU will be a point of focus for the exhibit as well, a fact that Carmichael appreciates. He hopes the stories can inspire up-and-coming musicians to keep playing.

“I’m very thankful for the deep commitment of the Kentucky museum to make something like this as long as a five-year exhibit, so that it can continue to bring stories into the fold and a more full picture of the music scene in this area,” Carmichael said.

The museum is partnering with the Kentucky Folklife Program, who has previously worked to archive local musical history. Their digital exhibit can be seen now at skymusicexhibit.org.

To inquire about donations, visit wku.edu/kentuckymuseum, navigate to the “exhibits” tab and select “upcoming.” Donation details can be found on the “Sonic Landscape” page.

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