John Fenn: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. I’m here with Steve Winick, a folklife specialist at the Center, and the creator of the Folklife Today blog.

Stephen Winick: Hi Folks! If you’re a regular listener, you’ll know that in October I usually make a Halloween joke before leading you through some scary collections. But we’ve been there and done that, and you can find those podcasts and blogs at loc.gov/podcasts/ and blogs.loc.gov/folklife. So the only scary thing I’ll talk about today is how scary it is that time flies by so quickly. It will be six years ago on Christmas Day that our beloved colleague Peter Bartis passed away, but before he did he made arrangements to fund a paid internship here at the American Folklife Center. For any of you who might have been with us since the first season, you might remember that this podcast started as a project that our first cohort of Bartis interns worked on in 2018, and here we are five years later!

John Fenn: That’s right, our first two interns in the Bartis (or Folklife Intern) program---Trelani Duncan and Mackenzie Kwok---helped write scripts, research collections, and appeared as guests on an episode. This past summer we hosted our sixth cohort of interns in the program, and we are joined now by Joe Z. Johnson and Deena Owens to talk about their primary projects and their time with us at the Library. Welcome!

Joe Johnson: Hello!

Deena Owens: Hi!

Stephen Winick: Thanks for taking the time. Before we get into your work at the Center, we should note that each of you wrapped up your internships and are no longer in the D.C. area. You finished in July, Joe, and Deena cleared out in August. So it’s good to have you both back, at least
virtually! What have you each been up to since then, and where are you joining from? Let’s start with you, Deena.

**Deena Owens:** So, after my last day, I spent another week in DC before moving on to Portland, Maine where I spent a magnificent Labor Day holiday with a close friend. From there, I returned home to Northwest Arkansas and I’m currently joining you from my home in Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas campus where I work as the Folk Arts Assistant for Arkansas Folk and Traditional Arts!

**John Fenn:** We certainly miss having you around, Deena. What about you, Joe?

**Joe Johnson:** After finishing my internship at the Center, I went straight to the Appalachian String Band Music Festival, otherwise known as Clifftop, in West Virginia. There, I spent a week in fellowship with other traditional musicians, catching up with old friends, and playing LOTS of music. After Clifftop, I returned to teach classes at Indiana University, Bloomington where I am in my 4th year as an Ethnomusicology Ph.D student.

**Stephen Winick:** You’ve both certainly been busy with great fun and also great work in folklore and ethnomusicology, and we’re delighted to see you. Now, Joe, on the last day of your internship, the Library published a Research Guide you created ---and that was the main project you worked on during your time at the Center. Can you give us an overview of that guide?

**Joe Johnson:** Of course. This research guide is a directory to the materials at the Library of Congress--primarily in the American Folklife Center--about African Americans who play the banjo. It includes a selection of images, online collections and media, as well as print resources on African-American banjo players past and present. In addition, there is a large section that points folks towards the many hours and linear feet of field recordings, field notes, and publications by folklorists and ethnomusicologists who have done in-depth studies on African-American banjo players.
Since I am an ethnomusicologist and folklorist myself, this guide has helped me learn the breadth, depth, and limitations of the research that has come before me. It opened my eyes to the issues of representation that come up when a Black musical practice is mostly documented by white researchers. I’m planning to use this knowledge as supporting background for my dissertation research that will look at the politics Black people teaching, learning, reinterpreting, and recovering the banjo as a Black instrument.

**John Fenn:** Can you tell us a bit about the research process for the guide? Given the complexity and extent of holdings in the Archive of Folk Culture, I’m imagining you had to develop some strategies and skills.

**Joe Johnson:** I definitely did. I was fortunate to be mentored on this project by Melanie Zeck, a Reference Librarian with the AFC. She was the one who helped me develop a matrix for pulling information on a culture group’s (African-Americans) relationship to a physical object (the banjo) from multiple databases and holdings within the AFC and across the Library. I used this matrix to map out a link chart that noted names of people, places, and locations, and the relationships between them—That’s why there were sticky notes all over the walls of my cubicle this summer—. After weeks of systematically searching databases, analyzing paper files, and logging information in my citation management software, I grouped everything by media type. While constructing the libguide, I went through each resource by type to write short descriptions of the holdings- This is when I realized how many sources depict African-American people as objects with no respect for our inner lives. With Melanie’s guidance, I crafted my description of archival materials to reflect the value of Black lives documented within. This process was where I chose to exclude the practice of blackface minstrelsy- a practice of racist imitations of African-Americans. Ultimately, the guide became more than a simple list of archival holdings. It is crafted as an educational tool that privileges Black banjo life from the perspective of a Black banjo player.

**Steve Winick:** Since this is a topic you know quite a bit about—an understatement, for sure—I’m sure it’s not fair to ask if you have a favorite recording from the archive. But I’m confident you have a list of tunes you’d like to share. What’s one of them?
Joe Johnson: One tune that I’m particularly fond of is Elizabeth, Libba, Cotten’s mashup of Here Old Rattler Here/ Sent for my Fiddle, Sent for my Son/ and Georgia Buck. This is a great demonstration of an African-American blues guitar player who was also well versed in banjo technique.

[Music: Elizabeth Cotten Banjo Medley]

John Fenn: That was a medley of banjo tunes by the great Elizabeth Cotten. It is one of many Library resources featured in the Research Guide that Joe produced and published during his internship, titled African American Banjo Music: Resources in the American Folklife Center. You can find the guide online at guides.loc.gov (just search “banjo”). We’ll also link to it directly from the AFC blog in a post about this episode.

Stephen Winick: Indeed, and there is also a post that Joe published on July 28 announcing the guide, which you can find on the Folklife Today blog at blogs.loc.gov/folklife. So, one thing that Joe and Deena’s internships had in common is that they each created Research Guides anchored in musical cultures. Deena—your guide is on shape note singing or Sacred Harp traditions. Can you tell us a bit about that guide?

Deena Owens: The shape-note singing guide is pretty much a “gateway” into learning about the tradition through the American Folklife Center archives. For those who don’t know, shape-notes replace the oval note heads with shapes that indicate a singing part—tenor, bass, alto, or treble. Singers use the syllables fa, sol, la, mi depending on their range to practice the pitch and the rhythm of the tune that’s been called out to the group by the leader, who also sets the tempo. So in sound recordings of shape-note songs, you’ll hear someone call out the page or number of a tune from the hymnal and then you’ll hear them sing it twice—once for practice and the second with the lyrics. The resources in the research guide are from a variety of regions and showcase that shape-note singing isn’t just something from long ago but is a living tradition with diverse participants.

Stephen Winick: Thanks, Deena. I’ll just mention that the American Folklife Center does have rich and varied shape-note collections, and the best place to look online is Deena’s guide first of all at Guides.loc.gov, which can lead you to many of our materials, and then also the Lomax Digital Archive at Culturalequity.org, where there are over 150 selections of shape-
note singing from our collections. So Deena, that guide is a great map to our collections!

**John Fenn:** Deena, what was your research process like? I remember talking with you early on in the internship after you pitched this project to me, and you said you were familiar with shape note singing from back home but didn’t know a lot about it. How did you approach exploring the collections?

**Deena Owens:**

This was definitely a moment where I felt like I was back in school! Starting from scratch to create something useful for researchers is a very intimidating task, so my first strategy was to remember that the vision for the guide was entry-level information because I’m not an expert. Working with Allina Migoni and Judith Gray was invaluable. Allina particularly helped me even before I landed on the topic for the guide by giving me some “homework” to glean the website and the research guides to kind of get my brain grounded in the work that goes on at AFC. I had a few other ideas, but in the end it was a social media post from my friend who organizes Sacred Harp singings that finally inspired me.

After deciding on the topic, I had the unique opportunity to be able to engage with scholars and musicians familiar with shape-note during the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which just happened to be centered around the Ozarks where I’m from. I asked them what they might like to see in a research guide or what they felt like more people should know. One of the biggest pieces of feedback I received was that they want more people to know that while four shaped notes is the most popular style that there is also a seven shaped note style that needs more recognition, as it tends be broadly categorized as gospel music without distinction for its unique musical tradition. As I was gleaning collections and picking resources, I kept this in mind because I wanted to make sure that both styles were represented.

For the guide, Allina was the biggest help! She educated me on the structure and the general voice to write in and helped me with my catalog searches. So, she did quite a bit! I don’t know if there’s enough time to talk about the institution that is Judith Gray. I swear she pulled an essay on shape-note singing out of thin air one day and it was probably the most
helpful in giving me a crash course in the history and musical structure of shape-note. I also must thank Joe! He found the singing convention in the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection and sent that to me. I was still getting into finding the right searches so that was so helpful! Speaking of which, finding the right kinds of search terms was an adventure. You know, “shape-note singing” and “Sacred Harp” are the main terms that are used for this tradition, but sometimes the field notes only referred to “singing conventions” or “harp singing” so that’s what ended up in the metadata. And singing conventions might not have necessarily been shape-note! This is where photographs were most helpful because shape-note singing has that “hollow square” formation to arrange the vocal parts. I think my experience working in libraries and archives really came in handy for these kinds of deep searches. I spent so many days just sitting at my desk listening to songs because I wanted to make sure I was highlighting digital collections with audio selections. It’s not a bad gig! I definitely learned to appreciate the differences between the four and seven note styles.

I think even up to my last day, there were resources still revealing themselves in the archive, so I can’t wait to see how it evolves and expands over time!

**John Fenn:** And is there a specific cut you’d like to share with us today?

**Deena Owens:**

I’d like to share with you the tune “I’m Gonna Walk with Him” which is in the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project Collection. It was recorded in Chicago on May 22, 1977 and is an example of the seven note style. As with most singings, you’ll hear the tune twice—once with the syllables and second with the lyrics.

[Music: “I’m Gonna Walk With Him” by the Stranger Home Baptist Church, Chicago ]

**Stephen Winick:** We just heard a song from the Shape Note Singing Convention at the Stranger Home Baptist Church in Chicago, 1977 a song featured in the guide that Deena Owens created during her internship. The guide is called “Shape-Note Singing: Resources in the American Folklife
Center” and can be found at guides.loc.gov. We’ll also put a link to it in the blog post about this episode on Folklife Today.

**John Fenn:** Deena, you also wrote a piece for the blog about the Research Guide---but working on the guide was not all you did at the Center during your internship. Can you share another opportunity or activity that stood out to you?

**Deena Owens:** There were so many wonderful opportunities to be involved in activities at not only AFC, but at the Library of Congress as a whole. I really appreciated being able to sit in for Teaching with Primary Sources and I always enjoyed seeing who was visiting us in the reading room! However, the one activity I’ve gushed about the most was our visit to the National Audiovisual Conservation Center. One of the things about me that maybe wasn’t so obvious from the work I’ve done is that I’m a movie nerd and have been interested in film and sound restoration and archives since I was a child. I was actually holding back tears most of the day being surrounded by such outstanding and passionate people who are doing cutting edge work to preserve media that is so important to me. Standing in a vault and coming face-to-face with some original nitrate prints of films I’ve seen and loved is just an unreal experience for a poor gal from Arkansas.

**Stephen Winick:** And, Joe, what about you? I know you were involved in a range of things beyond the Research Guide. What stands out to you as you think back on the internship?

**Joe Johnson:** Like Deena, one of my favorite experiences with the Library was our visit to the National Audiovisual Conservation Center. In addition to this, I really appreciated getting to spend time working the Aids Memorial Quilt collections. As a queer person, I found it incredibly powerful to learn about the lives and afterlives of queer ancestors who have come before me. It was encouraging to see the various educational projects that teachers were working on with the quilt as well as the incredible care that Dr. Chauncey took the curation of his workshop. It was a great way to remember those who were lost to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as well as a celebration of the medical advancements in HIV management and HIV preventative care. I had always heard of/learned about the quilt’s materials,
but it was a whole ‘nother thing to actually touch and help patrons use them to teach future generations.

**John Fenn:** It’s always rewarding to hear from interns about the range of opportunities they had---and took---while with us at the Library. Thanks to both of you for sharing!

**Stephen Winick:** Yes, it’s fun to hear from you both about your experiences at the Center. Now, we have two more questions for you each---and one’s a big one. First, can you share another song with us from your Research Guide? Then, the big one: What’s next for you?

**Deena Owens:** ANSWER [brief update on what you are doing, and what you plan to get up to in the coming year---doesn’t have to be folklife related!]

Sure, my final selection is featured in the research guide: Amazing Grace. This recording was done by Alan Lomax and George Pullen Jackson in August of 1942 at the Sacred Harp Singing Convention in Birmingham, Alabama. The song’s origin is as a shape-note hymn called “New Britain” before evolving over the years to the beloved tune it is today.

And that is a big question! I call myself a “baby folklorist” because I’m just getting started so my focus right now is applying for graduate school. I’ll hopefully be in a program next fall but your guess is as good as mine where that might be! Overall, the next year is just living and learning. This opportunity has really opened some new doors and opened my mind to what is possible for my life both professionally and personally. It’s like a side quest that leaves you disoriented but has a big impact on the outcome of the game!

**John Fenn:** Great, Deena. Let’s listen to the recording first, then we’ll hear from Joe.

[Music: “Amazing Grace” at the 1942 Sacred Harp Singing Convention in Birmingham, Alabama]

**John Fenn:** That was Amazing Grace from Alan Lomax’s collection in Alabama in 1942. So, Joe, what are you up to next?
**Joe Johnson:** Next for me? I have been working with the Oakland Public Conservatory to start building out a series of classes on African American fiddle and banjo playing. We are hoping to launch the first program in 2024!

**Steve Winick:** That sounds like an amazing opportunity for people to learn about the African American banjo, which as you know has been a neglected topic for so long. We really hope that takes off for you! And we’ll let Joe’s second audio selection play us out, but first we need to thank everyone. First in line are you two: Thanks Joe and Deena for all the great work you did while interning at the Center, and thanks for joining us!

**Deena Owens:** You’re welcome, and thanks for having me!

**Joe Johnson:** Yes, thanks for inviting me on the episode!

**John Fenn:** We’d also like to offer thanks to all the artists featured in this episode, as well as our engineer Jon Gold and the team at the Library who help us deploy the podcast. And of course thanks to you, Steve!

**Stephen Winick:** Thanks to you as well, John. Joe- what will we hear now?

**Joe Johnson:** Next up we are going to hear Dink Robert’s “Coo Coo Bird” from the album *Black Banjo Songsters of North Carolina and Virginia*. Dink Roberts was an African-American banjo player and multi-instrumentalist from Haw River, N.C.. In the song, Dink demonstrates his deeply expressive storytelling practice as well as his other worldly banjo technique. This audio was recorded as part of the Cecelia Conway and Tommy Thompson Recording Project in 1974.

[Music: Dink Roberts plays “Coo Coo Bird.”]

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov