

Archival Resources on the Web

By Lindy Smith, Head of LaBudde Special Collections, University of Missouri-Kansas City
**Improving New Approaches to Digital Humanities Instruction
in the COVID-19 Era**

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When the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC) Conservatory students in Dr. Sarah Tyrrell’s graduate Advanced Research and Bibliography class started work on their semester-long project to make an online exhibit featuring LaBudde Special Collections’ Barney Kessel Collection (<https://library.umkc.edu/archival-collections/kessel>) in February 2019, they had no idea how complicated that research would soon become.

LaBudde Special Collections, UMKC’s manuscripts and rare books repository, has an established relationship with the UMKC Conservatory, which offers majors in all aspects of music, as well as theater and dance. LaBudde faculty and staff regularly work with a number of Conservatory classes, including Research and Bibliography, which is a requirement for all graduate music students, and Advanced Research and Bibliography, which is optional for most majors but helps build on the research skills established by its introductory counterpart. Multiple sections of Research and Bibliography are offered most semesters, and students work in groups that are each assigned different collections to investigate, giving graduate music students majoring in everything from performance to composition to musicology an opportunity to do hands-on primary source research with one of LaBudde’s many music-related collections. Advanced Research and Bibliography classes tend to be small, about eight students, and they work together as a group on an intensive project using a single collection. This semester they were assigned to work with the papers of jazz guitarist Barney Kessel.

Kessel (1923–2004) had a long career performing with jazz greats like Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Oscar Peterson, and Billie Holiday and was also a member of the Wrecking Crew, a legendary group of studio musicians, recording with performers like Elvis, the Beach Boys, and Sonny and Cher. He also hosted a radio show called “Inside Jazz” and wrote a column on guitar pedagogy for *Guitar Player* magazine. The Barney Kessel Collection contains 18 linear feet of manuscript materials and

385 audiovisual items dating from 1923 to 2004 and covers all aspects of his life and career. It was donated to UMKC in 2016 by his widow, Phyllis Kessel, and processed the following spring.

The spring 2020 Advanced Research and Bibliography class visited LaBudde for a kick-off session where they were introduced to the collection and the staff who would be assisting them in creating this exhibit. A major project like this requires a lot of people. This included Anthony Rodgers, an Academic Library Fellow who had formerly taken the class and could provide a useful perspective on completing a similar project; Dr. Anthony LaBat, operations specialist, who processed the collection; and a team of others including Chuck Haddix, curator of the Marr Sound Archives; Sean McCue, user interface and graphic designer; and Buddy Pennington, head of Electronic Resources and Systems. Included additionally were Sandy Rodriguez, associate dean of Special Collections and Archives and head of Digital Archives and Stewardship; Lindy Smith, head of LaBudde Special Collections; and Garth Tardy, metadata librarian, who would work with students on research, metadata, design, digitization, and exhibit construction. The students dubbed themselves “The Barney Bunch” and started a blog, *The Barney Kessel Project* (<https://info.umkc.edu/thebarneykesselproject/?p=9>), to track their progress on the exhibit. The blog was created using WordPress and is hosted at info.umkc.edu, UMKC’s online blog and web publishing domain.

The Barney Bunch was able to make a handful of scheduled visits to conduct research in the collection in late February, but a few weeks into the project, UMKC announced that classes would be going online for the remainder of the semester and the University Libraries began making adjustments to hours, services, and staffing due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that access to collections was about to be temporarily put on hold and the future of the project was uncertain.

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Lauren White, Assistant Editor

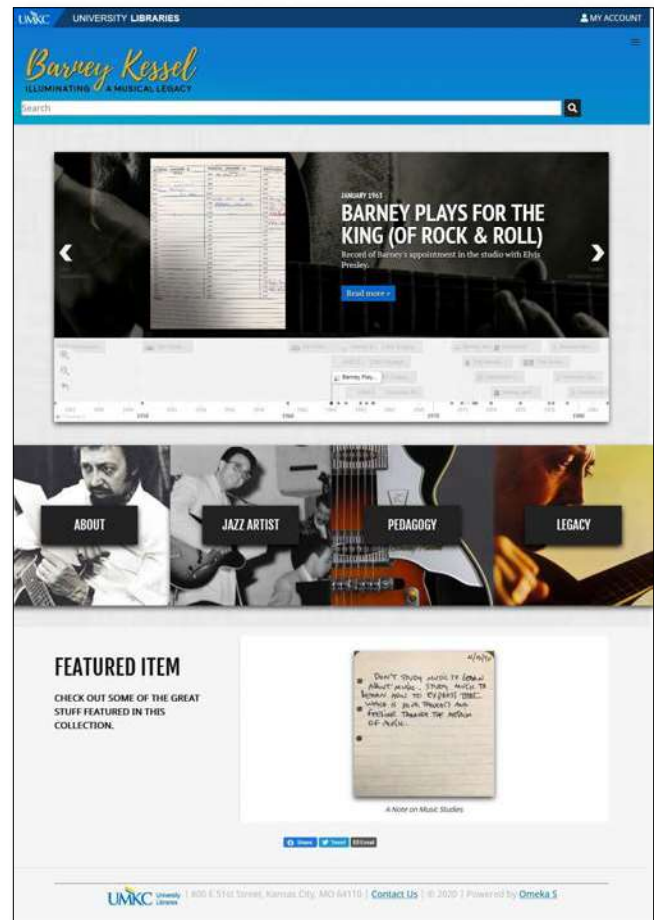
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To help mitigate this unexpected interruption, LaBudde staff sprang into action to solicit scanning requests from the students to make as much requested collection content as possible available digitally so students could continue to work from home. In the week between the LaBudde reading room closing to the public and the last staff member transitioning to work from home, staff was able to fill requests for more than 200 pages of collection materials for students to use to complete the project. The collection materials were digitized using a Bookeye planetary scanner and shared as PDFs using Box.com. Dr. Tyrrell recognized the LaBudde staff for this work in an email to students, writing, “THIS! **THIS** is how you know you work and study and research in the BEST place on earth right now.”



As you can probably imagine, these scans weren't quite enough to base an entire digital exhibit on, so the Barney Bunch got creative and reached out to Kessel's widow, Phyllis, who donated the collection to LaBudde and has maintained a relationship with the repository. They created their own additional primary source by conducting an interview with her to document more information about Kessel's life and career and included a transcript of that interview (<https://exhibits.library.umkc.edu/s/kessel/item/2226>; which will be added to LaBudde and made available to future researchers) in the exhibit. Their experience working on this project during the pandemic is documented on their previously linked blog.

The students were able to proceed with image selection, content transcription, description, organization, and narrative writing. Since the exhibit was built using low resolution scans, some images are slightly pixelated. While working from home, they received additional assistance from UMKC Libraries staff in a variety of departments on building an exhibit in Omeka-S, metadata best practices, and copyright via email and Zoom. The Barney Bunch successfully completed and shared the exhibit, “Illuminating a Musical Legacy: The Barney Kessel Project” (<https://exhibits.library.umkc.edu/s/kessel/page/home>), in May 2020. The exhibit focuses on four areas: Kessel's biography, performing career, pedagogy, and legacy. It uses 46 items to tell these intertwined stories. You can browse the exhibit by these categories or via a chronological timeline built using Timeline JS. The exhibit is publicly available and will serve as an additional online resource for researchers interested in Kessel.



Omeka-S was chosen because it was built for institutions, so it handles multiple sites more elegantly than its Classic predecessor, which was designed for individual projects. Libraries staff had created another exhibit using the platform in fall of 2019 that allowed for exploration of functionality and modules, but this was the first exhibit built as a student project. To better support students working in a relatively new platform, two students were assigned as Omeka S ambassadors and met with staff weekly via Zoom meetings throughout the semester. The project uses a number of modules, including Metadata Browse, Sharing, and Rights Statements, which simplifies inclusion of statements from RightsStatements.org. In addition to these publicly available customizations, Libraries staff modified the Papers Theme for a custom look and built a script that features a randomly selected item on the exhibit homepage.

This experience has served as a good learning opportunity and has influenced the way Research and Bibliography classes worked remotely with archival materials this fall and likely into next spring. While LaBudde Special Collections has been open to a limited number of researchers by appointment since August, we are not working with classes in the reading room due to quarantine procedures for physical materials and overall safety concerns. Instead, we are providing digital access to a predetermined set of materials

(roughly 100 pages of manuscript materials and two to three audio recordings, depending on what is available in each collection) that give students an idea of the kinds of information and formats contained in the collection and then allowing students to request additional digital materials (up to another 100 pages and a few recordings per group) to allow them to take their projects in whatever direction they want. We are also directing students to make better use of related and already digitized collection materials in the Marr Sound Archives.

The redesigned projects will give students the opportunity to learn how to conduct remote research, which is likely to be a more practical option for their own research in the near future and perhaps beyond, depending on how quickly academic travel and research budgets bounce back.

Though this process was not without difficulties, UMKC Libraries and LaBudde Special Collections staff, Dr. Tyrrell, and the Barney Bunch were able to work together to prioritize immediate needs, develop creative solutions, and ultimately reach their goal of creating a successful digital exhibit that has been very well received. The project also served as a useful test case for developing distanced primary source projects until we are able to safely host groups of students in our spaces again.