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Meredith Willson's THE MUSIC MAN archives launched online

Great American Songbook Foundation partners with
HistoryIT to create Meredith Willson Digital Collection

Carmel, IN – The Great American Songbook Foundation today launched a website showcasing the archives of composer and playwright Meredith Willson, the man behind the Broadway and cinema hits *The Music Man* and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*.

The Meredith Willson Digital Collection (songbook.historyit.com) makes a trove of historic materials accessible worldwide to researchers, musicians and fans of Willson, who also penned such popular songs as “You and I” and “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas.”

The project is the result of a collaboration between the Songbook Foundation and HistoryIT, a digital history company that helps organizations transform their archives into engaging online collections. Working with Foundation staff, HistoryIT team members identified a representative sample of compositions, scrapbooks, correspondence and photographs from Willson’s career, then digitized and tagged the materials for display on a search-optimized website.

“Meredith Willson’s career spanned a Golden Age of American entertainment, and we are thrilled to make these historic materials widely available online,” said Chris Lewis, executive director of the Foundation. “We are so grateful that The Music Man Foundation not only entrusted us with the collection, but also provided the funding that enabled us to partner with HistoryIT on this groundbreaking digital preservation project.”

The Willson materials are part of the vast Songbook Archives & Library housed at the Songbook Foundation’s headquarters, the Center for the Performing Arts in Carmel, Indiana. Founded by acclaimed performer and preservationist Michael Feinstein to advance the legacy of American popular song, the Foundation oversees collections totaling more than 100,000 items, with highlights that include rare Andrews Sisters memorabilia, orchestrations arranged by Ray Charles, the piano used by composer Richard A. Whiting to write “Hooray for Hollywood,” and Hy Zaret’s original lyrics for “Unchained Melody,” one of the 20th century’s most recorded songs.

The Meredith Willson Digital Collection offers an intimate look into the life and art of a man who became a multimedia celebrity and success story, Songbook Archivist Lisa Lobdell said. Items include photos and musical scores dating to the 1920s; scripts from radio shows he hosted; character sketches and early drafts for *The Music Man*; personal scrapbook pages; correspondence with such famous figures as former first lady Mamie Eisenhower, a fellow Iowa native who became a close friend; and Vietnam-era letters exchanged with a nephew who later died in combat.

“One theme that emerges from this collection is that so much of his life was rolled into *The Music Man*, even though it wasn’t strictly autobiographical,” Lobdell said. “You can see the connections to characters and events in his life, how important his hometown was. He was kind of an everyman, and he never lost touch with that.”

As funding is secured, the Foundation plans to create digital versions of all of Willson’s archives and to produce interactive features such as exhibits and education modules on the digital collection site.

“We are grateful to partner with an organization that is determined to preserve and share its stunning collection of artifacts tied to some of the greatest music ever produced,” said HistoryIT Founder and CEO Kristen Gwinn-Becker, PhD. “Without this commitment to digital stewardship, countless records of our nation’s creative past would be lost.”

About the Great American Songbook Foundation

The mission of the Great American Songbook Foundation, founded in 2007 by five-time Grammy® Award nominee Michael Feinstein, is to inspire and educate by celebrating the Great American Songbook – the timeless standards of pop, jazz, Broadway and Hollywood. Headquartered at the affiliated [Center for the Performing Arts](#) in Carmel, IN, the Foundation preserves and elevates this rich legacy by curating physical artifacts of its creators, performers and publishers; offering programs for the public and research opportunities for scholars and musicians; providing educational opportunities and multidisciplinary curricula for student musicians, including the annual Songbook Academy® summer intensive; overseeing the Songbook Hall of Fame; and operating a multimedia gallery for public exhibition of its collections. The Foundation is a Cultural Affiliate of the Los Angeles-based Grammy Museum®. More information is available at www.TheSongbook.org.

About HistoryIT

Digital history leader HistoryIT helps transform archives into engaging web sites that are easily accessed by scholars and the general public alike. The company's team of historians and technologists partners with organizations of all types and sizes to develop and implement strategic plans that leverage historical collections. Clients include the [National Baseball Hall of Fame](#), the [Salt Institute for Documentary Studies](#) and the [Historical Society of Washington, D.C.](#)

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CUTLINES:

1. In the 1940s, Meredith Willson worked for Armed Forces Radio, hosted his own NBC radio show and frequently performed on *The Burns and Allen Show*.
<http://songbook.historyit.com/detail-page.php?id=2177>
2. This early draft of *The Music Man* dates to 1954, three years before its Broadway opening.
<http://songbook.historyit.com/detail-page.php?id=2117>
3. Willson poses with Shirley Jones (left) and Dinah Shore in a 1961 TV promotional photo.
<http://songbook.historyit.com/detail-page.php?id=2197>
4. Meredith Willson Digital Collection landing page
songbook.historyit.com