An evening at Mack McCormick's house in Spring Branch always has the same structure, if vastly different forms. First things first: drinks. At 78, the widower is not getting around like he used to, so he asks his guest to fetch them. In his freezer there are Tupperware bottles filled with precisely measured cocktails of McCormick's own mixing — margaritas, martinis, gin and tonics.

Gin in hand, he leans back in his easy chair, cane by his side, Post-it note-festooned books in easy reach all around him, beloved spaniel Charles at his feet, and the tales start spilling out of him, not as a torrent, but more like a mighty, bending river of lore.

"You could see the nose hairs on the actors in there," he says. "It was-mesmerizing."

His Audubon Society kitchen clock will chime on the hour: Since it is seven o'clock, it will chirp a cardinal's call.

And then he will impart how he codified the spelling of the word "zydeco," how he met the hobo Henry "Ragtime Texas" Thomas (one of the earliest-born and most scholarly-vital African–American musicians...
ever to record) on the street near Annunciation church downtown on a blustery winter’s day.

Then there was his out-and-out discovery of Mance Lipscomb on the front porch of his Navasota cabin, and his rediscovery of Lightnin' Hopkins in 1959. (By that time, African-American audiences had passed Hopkins by and the musician was leading a life of obscure dissolution.)

Or the times, when, as the local correspondent for Down Beat magazine, he interviewed giants of American song including Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, face to face.

"Never ask them a question they've been asked before," he will advise. "Never."

The bird-clock chimes again, this time as a chickadee.

Or maybe he'll get rolling on the places he's lived and the jobs he's had — the chicken ranch he worked on in south Alabama, his gig wiring airplanes, his stints as a Houston taxi driver, Fourth Ward -census-taker, Ohio record store clerk, associate of the Smithsonian Institute. And then there was the time he pulled the plug on Bob Dylan at the legendary 1965 Newport Folk Festival, not because Dylan famously went electric, but because Mack's act — a singing work gang of Texas ex-convicts he managed and brought to the festival — was next and he needed the stage.

All of that plus learned discourses on poet heroes Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the eight plays he has finished (one of which was staged in London to disastrous reviews), the eight books he has not, and the play about Whitman and Dickinson he has likewise not finished.

"In the 20th century you had screen stars," he'll say. "Walt Whitman was a still-star. He was the first guy to figure out how to look good on camera."

And there again goes the Audubon clock, this time with the melancholy moan of a mourning dove.

Time is running out for Mack McCormick. He'll look at you from under his shock of snow-white hair and tell you so, with his characteristic black humor. "Old people live to the end of their money," he says. "I lost about $40,000 on the markets last week, so I figure that's about three years gone for me."
Of more immediate concern, Mack McCormick's world is already dimming around the edges. His eyes are failing him. He suffers from both macular degeneration and a condition called Fuchs' dystrophy, a malady of the corneas in which the eyes lose the ability to drain themselves of water. If untreated, the disease causes progressively indistinct, blurry vision.

Today, McCormick reads with a powerfully lit magnifying glass and wears an eye-patch to shroud his overly sensitive left eye. He's dithering about when to have an eye surgery his doctors are urging on him. After all, he's got that play to finish.

"My third act is weak," he says. "It really needs some work."

It's a particularly cruel condition for a man like McCormick, whose eyes are his all. His voracious reading and voluminous writing have been curtailed, and what's more, much of his life's work remains unfinished. There's that play and the manuscripts, some needing only nips and tucks, and others needing drastic overhauls.

Two of those unfinished works — the two-volume *History of the Texas Blues* (which grew to incorporate every form of Texas music) and *Biography of a Phantom*, a Robert Johnson biography — have been as eagerly anticipated by the scholarly music world as Guns N' Roses's *Chinese Democracy* has been by the hard rock crowd, albeit in Mack's case for decades longer.

In McCormick's possession are piles and piles of papers, lore organized in ways only he can understand. There are thousands of photos and negatives only he can place, stories only he can snap into context, origins only he can pinpoint. A vast swath of Texas culture lies in state here in his house, and there's another hoard in another home of his in the Mexican mountains, and still more treasure cached in storage in town.

And right now he doesn't know where it will all end up after he's gone.

That his eyes are going seems an especially vindictive twist of fate. It wasn't that long ago that McCormick finally got control of a bipolar disorder that cost him a decade or so of productivity, the weak third act of his life, and now the dark is at the door.

"Years ago, I went crazy," he says simply. "I got in the habit of going
down to the Dunkin Donuts on Long Point where the cops drink their coffee and I would get in arguments with them. I used to bring in this big can of spray paint and tell the cops that they needed to paint their bumpers with their car number in huge numbers so people would know who they were when and if the cops were misbehaving.

"Poor cops," he continues. "They were just trying to drink their coffee. You have several tracks in your mind, and part of me could tell they hated to see me come in: Here comes that guy with the spray paint again. It irritated the shit out of them."

McCormick says decades of his life were warped by the illness. "There would be days I would spend 20 hours a day in bed," he says. "And then other times I would be on top of the world. ON TOP OF THE WORLD! Everything would be great. And I'd start up another book and I'd get pretty far along in that book. And then I'd crash back down. It was never a regular cycle. It was always unpredictable — I'd go back down in the ditch for a while and then come back with I GOTTA GREAT IDEA! Not that old book, that's tiresome."

McCormick would ride that endless merry-go-round for over two decades — all or part of the '80s and '90s. "I went 25 years waiting for them to invent the medicine that would make me get better," he says. And yet, even before his eyes started failing him, he still had a hard time finishing his projects.

Part of it stems from a relentless drive to perfect every detail. A current project — the Dickinson/Whitman play — hit snags when McCormick had to determine if people in that time could strike matches or enlarge photographs, and each of those problems resulted in researching the history of those technologies. Then he needed to track down and read a copy of an 1860s short story called "Life in the Iron Mills," because Dickinson read it and thus he had to as well.

"He is such a perfectionist about tiny little points of historical detail," says Dr. Roger Wood, a professor of English at Houston Community College, folklorist and the author of Down in Houston and Texas Zydeco. "He is a better writer than I am in the sense of his attention to detail — I would just gloss over it and move on. But he gets really hung up on whether or not you could strike a match and light it in 1860, or could you blow up a photograph in 1855.

You could call it an attention to detail, but no doubt some psychologists
would see symptoms of attention deficit -disorder.

McCormick might not disagree. It would put him in pretty good company, to his way of thinking.

"Da Vinci never finished his paintings," he adds. "He got bored by the time he got to the corners." ________________

"Here's this 78-year-old self-reliant Bohemian guy who is in his own weird way a real Renaissance man," marvels Wood. "He's been involved in drama not only from the theatrical end, staging end, but also as a writer of drama. He's very much into food and what anthropologists call foodways — how people make and eat food and use it in unique contexts. He's done field recordings, he helped name zydeco (see "The Collector: Going Backwards"), he managed Lightnin' Hopkins for a while — any one of those things would make him significant in our city's history."

Robert Burton McCormick was born in Pittsburgh in 1930. Gregg and Effie May McCormick, his parents, were pioneering X-ray technicians, among the first in the world to be trained in the technology. McCormick says his father had little trouble getting well-paid work. His mother was not so lucky — she met with Depression-fueled gender discrimination, and as a result, McCormick says he became a feminist. What's more, his parents' divorce propelled McCormick on a gypsy-like childhood, as his mother traveled from place to place seeking work — Pittsburgh, Denver, Ohio, New York, Alabama, Texas.

McCormick has said that he never spent two consecutive years in any one school, and at each one, he was a bookish, picked-on fish out of water. "When I would live in Texas, the other kids would say, 'Here comes that smart-ass Yankee.' When I would live up North, they would say, 'Here comes that Texan. I bet he thinks he's really tough.'"

But all that traveling did serve him well in other ways. It attuned him early to the regional differences — the "varied carols of America" Walt Whitman once praised — that would fascinate him for the rest of his life. And his father, who would take him in from time to time, would infect him with a specific love of all things Texas. "He knew a lot of things that weren't found in books or anywhere else," McCormick says. "You wouldn't call him a folklorist, but he collected Texana."

By 1947, McCormick was more or less settled, living with his mother, who had at last found stable work at an osteopath's office in Houston's
East End. Mack attempted without success to finish high school at Sam Houston, which was then located on the tough side of downtown. "Like all downtown high schools, it was really rough," McCormick remembers. "The boys carried zip guns, and years later, after I dropped out and was driving a cab, I would see the girls from my classes out walking the streets. The boys had turned them out. They were all on drugs."

Dropout or not, McCormick was able to persuade the editor of Down Beat, then as now America’s premier jazz journal, to sign him up as a Texas correspondent. Through that job, he scored many an interview. Once he was sent to chat with Woody Herman, who had brought with him Ted Williams as a special surprise. Another time, McCormick scooped the national media by using a subterfuge to score an interview with Frank Sinatra.

"I knew he was staying at the Shamrock, so I called over there and asked to talk to his manager," he recalls. "I told him I had no interest in his personal life, and that I wanted to ask him about Drew Page" — a former sideman of Sinatra’s — "and the guy I was talking to said, 'Drew Page?' And then in the background I could hear Sinatra say, 'Who wants to know about Drew Page?'"

When McCormick got into jazz, the music was still considered beneath the contempt of American polite society, which was then still more or less in thrall to British and European art and culture. (Not to mention terrified of the specter of race-mixing jazz, swing and nascent rock and roll brought into view.) McCormick's own involvement in music brought him by extension into the civil rights movement: McCormick once integrated a segregated jazz concert he promoted here by giving the police on duty conflicting seating instructions.

But McCormick was also busy tearing down other ignorant ideas, especially those regarding the superiority of European art over American.

"Back then all these critics, scholars and writers were still trying to get jazz considered as respectable," he remembers. "Just to get it respected was hard; then they would worry about having it classed as art. And then maybe even something that was really American that we should be proud of."

"That's so typical of America. We were still thinking only European art was valid," he says.
The Houston of the '40s and '50s was rife with a cultural inferiority complex. Back then, the "world-class" high art institutions — Jones Hall, the Alley Theatre and the like — were either just coming into being or altogether nonexistent, and as for native-born art, respectable Houstonians regarded the likes of Hopkins, country music Hall of Famer Floyd Tillman and zydeco king Clifton Chenier with disdain, if they even knew of their existence at all.

McCormick has always sung a different tune — if not one of himself, then one of his own country. He was there for the creation when American drama and American music, so-called high and low art, each came into its own.

"Mack has this sense of 'I'm going to express myself and if it doesn't fit with Old World ideas of literature, then so be it. Perhaps that's not what I am,'" says Wood. "I think that kind of stubborn independence and self-reliance really appeals to Mack because it is the story of his whole life."

Wood thinks the impulse that drew McCormick to American music was the same one that drew him to Whitman. "Whitman is to literature what jazz is to music," says Wood. "It's this attitude of 'My job is not to re-create what was passed to me, but to understand that tradition and make it new and mine and individual and to jam.' The real daring musicianship of a jazzman who isn't afraid to rip and isn't afraid to fail, to just follow the impulse with words on paper."

McCormick dove into the worlds of both drama and music. He was there when Nina Vance staged her first plays in the Alley, before it moved into the converted dance studio on Berry Street that was its home before it settled into that bunker-like edifice downtown.

He remembers hanging around with Tennessee Williams outside another playhouse on Main. Williams was in town staging a production, and McCormick the aspiring playwright would attempt to pick the master's brain while Williams smoked outside. "He was a sweet guy, he had that Southern accent and he acted like he didn't know he was famous," McCormick remembers. He further recalls that Williams always seemed distracted. "For some reason in that part of town, there were always lots of muscular young men around, and Williams was always trying to make eye contact with them."

With or without any meaningful input from Williams, McCormick seemed to have a bright future as a dramatist at the time. He recalls that after a chance meeting with an English ballerina here in Houston, one of his plays was shipped to London and staged there by one of the top
companies — the same one that won fame for many of the works of England's "Angry Young Men" movement. McCormick says that his play was trashed. "One of the critics called it 'the fag end of American neo-expressionism.' Do you know what 'fag end' means? A worthless piece of rope."

Since then, none of his plays has ever been staged.

Dramatic setbacks aside, McCormick was doing well as a cultural historian. He tracked down Hopkins in 1959 and got him recording again after a hiatus of several years. When Chris Strachwitz came to town looking for talent to record for his nascent Arhoolie label, it was McCormick who took him to Mance Lipscomb and Hopkins. (Hell, it was McCormick who named it "Arhoolie".) He married Mary Badeaux in 1964 (they would have a daughter in 1971) and he recorded numerous albums, ranging from two volumes of his field recordings to an album by Fourth Ward barrelhouse pianist Robert Shaw to another of bawdy songs, poems and recitations called The Unexpurgated Folk Songs of Men. (Full disclosure: my late grand-father delivers a raunchy recitation on that last record.)

Both to bankroll these pursuits and also to engage in them more directly, McCormick took day jobs that enabled him to talk to large numbers of ordinary Houstonians. The taxi-driving gig was one such. Another was his job with the Census Bureau, which he took in 1960.

"Nobody wanted to do the 'Negro' or 'colored' sections," he recalls. He eagerly volunteered.

McCormick would ask the questions he was instructed to ask, and then others of his own devising, such as "Who plays the music here? Where do you go to dance? What did you do there?"

There he stumbled on what he regards as one of his most impressive feats of scholarship. He has always been fascinated by points of origin, and here he found the whole shebang of an entire style of blues and boogie-woogie piano playing.

Armed with what he had learned from his census job, and aided by Edward "Buster" Pickens, McCormick started zeroing in on a clear point of origin — ground zero in Fourth Ward for what came to be known as "the Santa Fe" style of piano playing. (It owed its name to the railroad that then cut through Fourth Ward.)
"At that time, grocery stores and drugstores liked to have people hanging around," he says. "That's why you hear about the cracker barrel. This is what this store called Passante's was like — the owner had a cracker barrel on the front porch, checkers, he had kids hanging out. And then one day he got a piano and put it on the porch."

Sooner or later that piano was commandeered by one Peg Leg Will, a New Orleans-trained survivor of that city's ancient, rough-and-tumble whorehouse/gambling joint milieu.

"He was from an earlier generation — this was the '20s, and he was from the turn of the century. He started hanging around there and playing, and then the kids started hanging around, watching him. The same kids who might have just left the baseball field. Peg Leg Will would let them take over and he would watch while they would compete against each other."

Eventually, McCormick would connect 212 full-time or part-time professional piano players back to Peg Leg Will's front-porch academy. "I have never heard of any cultural outburst like this. Fourth Ward had about 10,000 people then, so you had 212 of them go on to play music professionally. Think of the Renaissance, where you had millions and millions of people and 20 or 30 were outstanding artists. Here you had 212 out of 10,000."

But in typical McCormick fashion, answering all those questions only brought on more.

"What that doesn't explain is where these kids got all that talent," he says. "That's the problem. You and I could have walked down the streets of New Orleans in 1900, and little kids would have come around begging pennies, and that would have been Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Jelly Roll Morton, who I guess would have been fully grown then. But where the hell did they get so much talent? I'm talking before it developed, where did it come from? Where did they get that innate ability in one locality? Is it true in other localities? Does it take someone like Buddy Bolden to come along and influence them? Is the talent that develops there also elsewhere but not developed?"

The clock chimes again — this time as a mockingbird. It's getting late, but the pre-measured cocktails and stories without limits are still flowing.

But even the mightiest rivers eventually end up in the sea. Nobody, least
of all McCormick, knows where his life's work will end up after he is
gone. Perhaps it will share the Bob Bailey Studios Photographic
Archive's fate. The Bailey archive — some 300,000 wildly disparate
negatives and photographs from a Heights photography studio of
Houston taken between the 1930s and '90s — wound up in Austin, in
this case at the University of Texas's Center for American History. It
would be a shame if McCormick's archive were to end up 200 miles or
still further away.

At least now that he knows that in 1860 matches could be struck and
photos enlarged, now that he has that copy of "Life in the Iron M
ills," he can get cracking on that troublesome third act.

But then beyond that, there are what he estimates are 20 records of
unreleased field recordings, acres of raw text on subjects as varied as his
life, miles of film of Americans great and obscure.

So what if so much of it is unfinished? It's fitting: Houston is the city
that never forgets that it is forever building.

And like the man said, Da Vinci didn't paint in the corners, either.

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"Old people live to the end of their money," Mack McCormick says. "I lost
about $40,000 on the markets last week, so I figure that's about three years
gone for me."

Author Dr. Roger Wood says McCormick takes a jazzman's approach to life:
stubborn independence and self-reliance rule.

The King of Dowling Street: Sam "Lightnin" Hopkins striding through his
Third Ward domain. McCormick rediscovered Hopkins in the late '50s and
intermittently managed his career later.

Jim Marshall