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Review of Music Preservation and Archiving Today

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Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson, eds. *Music Preservation and Archiving Today*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

In the preface to their new collection of essays, editors Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson state their goal in compiling such a text: “to both understand how the music community preserves its materials and how we could make the process easier to understand” (xiii). The editors are particularly interested in the local and regional musics making their way into archives over the past ten to twenty years. This approach aligns with a postmodern philosophy to archiving that seeks to move away from “traditional collecting” focused on the “powerful and privileged,” ideas the authors borrow from F. Gerald Ham and Howard Zinn (128).¹

Although the core audience for the book appears to be those already in the archiving world, because many of the essays are about the multiple stakeholders invested in the project of researching, preserving, organizing, and sharing musical culture, the text is accessible and relevant to those beyond the traditional reach of the field. Reflecting that approach, the collection is divided into three sections: the first consists of four essays written by archivists working in established institutions describing their approaches toward documenting particular music scenes, the second has three essays by those from other fields making use of archives in their work, and the third contains four essays by a mix of archivists and nonarchivists on “Outsider Music Preservation.” Such variety is the book’s most significant strength and results in several thought-provoking pieces with creative, actionable recommendations for readers similarly engaged in opening the archive. Unfortunately, as discussed later, other types of diversity do not appear to have been considered when selecting essays and writers for this collection.

The first section of the book presents a wide range of approaches toward collecting popular, local music by professional archivists. Rory Grennan, Katherine Nichols, and Scott Schwartz describe a slow, careful academic process that strives to represent a wide variety of musics with high research value from the Champaign-Urbana region of Illinois. In constructing their plan, these authors compiled a review board with members who work in relevant scholarly and professional fields. Less traditional approaches are detailed by Andy Leach and Jennie Thomas in “Preserving Rock-and-Roll History on the North Coast” and Norie Guthrie in “Pushing the Boundaries of Donor Relations to Build the Houston Folk Music Archive.” Leach and Thomas recount active outreach events like “Scan Days,” which help preserve ephemera both by literally scanning data into the archive and by educating those with private collections in how they might care for those things in their possession, increasing the longevity of rapidly decaying items. Guthrie offers a more radical, bottom-up approach in “Pushing the Boundaries,” by describing her own successful experiment to embed herself in the Houston folk scene to cultivate both donors and researchers. Although the technique raises unanswered questions about how an institution might encourage such activity while also insuring just remuneration, Guthrie’s willingness to work in such a way serves as a reminder of the multifaceted value we ought to accord those holding cultural knowledge.

¹ Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson, “Pursuing Preservation in the Do-It-Yourself Music Community,” 128, summarizing the work of F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (January 1975): 5–13, and Howard Zinn, “The Archivist and Radical Reform,” speech to the Society of American Archivists, 1970.

The creative and traditional elements of the first three essays are balanced in the techniques described by Megan Fraser and Melissa Haley in “Building Punk Rock Collections at UCLA Library Special Collections.” As the title of the essay indicates, these archivists were working out of an established institution to create collections of antiestablishment music and related ephemera, requiring a delicate process of donor cultivation. The ethos of their institutional mandate, which “places an emphasis on broadly defined communities whose history is overlooked but crucial to understanding the development of the metropolis,” resonates with the implicit purposes of this essay collection. The authors’ resulting relationships with donors “are perpetual and evolving and [we] hope to instill in them the understanding that we are stewards of their collections but not in the business of taking over or deciding for them how their materials should be interpreted” (50–51). Such a philosophy suggests a practical, broadly applicable answer to the perpetual quest to open and diversify the archive—at least in terms of cultivating new donors.

Of course, once one has assembled a collection or opened an archive, one needs people to come make use of the materials. Two innovative approaches toward archival use can be found in the second section of the book, “Leveraging Archival Materials.” The first of these is Andrew A. Klein’s “Exploring the Houston Folk Music Archive in the First-Year Classroom,” which chronicles pedagogical techniques developed to respond to the collection described by Guthrie in the first section. Most refreshing about this piece is the author’s honesty about some of the pitfalls in his approach, even while he maintains the appropriateness of archival research in an early collegiate class.

Among the best essays in the collection is the second in this section, Jessica Thompson’s “Mastering the Sonics of Historic Recording Media.” It offers poetic evocation of the experience of listening to a record, complete with an analysis of the mechanical “noise” involved, alongside a description of the ways that experience might be mediated. After establishing the various choices listeners could have when absorbing one single track of music, Thompson uses descriptions of her recent work on commercial releases of Errol Garner’s *Concert by the Sea* and a compilation set, *Live at Caffe Lena*, to illustrate the types of decisions audio preservationists ought to confront in their work. Although included under the category of “Leveraging Archival Materials,” the essay is not only useful for those researching in archives. It is also a practical guidebook for any archivist engaged in audio preservation, particularly that involving the transfer of LPs to other formats, and a useful tool for “outsiders” with a desire to preserve but a lack of formal training. Thompson’s essay could easily find its way into the first section of *Music Preservation and Archiving Today*.

The idea that the three subtopics dividing the material here are permeable is confirmed by the third essay in this section, “Exploring the Antics of the Counterculture” by Jesse Jarnow, which focuses on Mark McCloud’s private collection of perforated sheets once laden with LSD (and now impotent). Jarnow suggests this collection mediates between Diana Taylor’s “archive” and “repertoire” categories when viewers drop acid while visiting, thus reenacting the experience anticipated by the materials.² Implicitly, this does not only apply to the visual experience of the archive but to the listening experience of culturally relevant music. Thus, although the collection itself is technically legal—McCloud won a lawsuit to that effect—the full meaning and effect of

² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

the archive cannot be achieved through legal means, rendering the collection a supreme example of outsider art and a peer to the “Outsider Music Preservation” described in section 3.

As indicated, some of the “Outsider Music Preservation” in the next section is not legal, especially that documented in the closing essay by Scott Carlson, “Bootleg Compilations as Fan Preservation.” If many of the pieces in sections 1 and 2 seem to stretch the confines of the terms “archive” and “preservation,” the essays in the third section verge on breaking it. Jeremy Berg’s “Preserving Music through Re-Issues” and Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson’s “Pursuing Preservation in the Do-It-Yourself Music Community” seem to suggest that traditional libraries and archives are simply inadequate to meet the ideals set forth by people like Howard Zinn and Gerald Ham. Once one combines the mission of documenting everyday people with the rapid production and reproduction of musico-cultural objects during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the sheer amount of material exceeds the profession’s capacity to store, organize, document, and promote it. Therefore, the reissue, often initiated to satisfy a niche fan market, ends up operating in lieu of a library-approved archival copy, even if the sound quality so carefully calibrated by an audio engineer like Jessica Thompson is rendered permanently inaccessible. Similarly, Guthrie and Carlson’s Indie Preserves project seeks to expand the “Scan Day” model explicated in Andy Leach and Jennie Thomas’s “Preserving Rock-and-Roll” by teaching music media and track fans how to preserve and share their collections; inevitably, the demands of this volume and breadth of material will necessitate the involvement of fans, consumers, and commercial enterprises in the activities of collection.

As impossible as the problem of how to preserve so many things might seem, far more difficult is how to circumvent the natural privileging of the influential and powerful so that the recreation of a local soundscape becomes possible in the confines of the archive. This question is never articulated in the text, much less answered in the essays, but it lurks particularly close to the surface of the two remaining pieces. The bootleg compilations Carlson describes reflect the taste and sensibility of a single listener interested in rare and inaccessible tracks but without concern for copyright restrictions. The benefit of such compilations are clear—they preserve recordings of songs that would otherwise be entirely lost—but their benefits are limited as well. Such tracks might be representative of a moment, or style, or group of acolytes, but they do not document a broad soundscape. Furthermore, their questionable legality leaves them out of the reach of institutions, perpetuating the reliance on fan collecting. Therefore, we are left with the tastes of someone with the time and resources to explore a remote corner of the sonic universe and present it neatly arranged for those with less time and fewer resources. In some respects, this merely seems like a contemporary version of the Victorian colonialist’s “Indian collection,” rather than the revolutionary, bottom-up assimilation it first appears to be.

Anthony Kwame Harrison’s archive of underground hip-hop recordings began as a fan project, morphed into material for an ethnomusicology dissertation, and finally became a private (currently inaccessible) archive. Harrison tracks this evolution in a self-aware essay that records the necessary boundary crossings that resulted in his collection. Perhaps more than any other piece in this text, “Preserving Underground Hip-Hop Tapes in Ethnographic Context,” underlines the personal idiosyncrasies motivating so much collecting. The participant-observer methodology Harrison used echoes Guthrie’s embedding project. One archive was an accidental byproduct of

enthusiastic study and another a purposeful gathering, but both strive to reflect the scene as an insider even while allowing their own connections and preferences to guide them.

It is precisely this issue of connections and preferences that causes some discomfort with this essay collection. While the text, to its credit, presents a variety of archival strategies by stakeholders with various types of interest in the archival process, it is lacking in other sorts of diversity one would expect from a title suggesting such a forward-looking philosophy. For example, although there were a few allusions to African American contributors to the rock-and-roll scene in Leach and Thomas's article and a discussion of Errol Garner's *Concert by the Sea* in Thompson's contribution, Harrison's essay is the only one in the book to focus on an African American genre. If the representation of African American participation in U.S. musical culture seems less than proportional, the representation of Latin American genres is worse—it simply does not exist. There is not one essay that even mentions a Latin American artist, piece, or subgenre (no Celia Cruz or Selena or Gloria Estefan; no *ranchera* or samba or salsa or rock latino or *corrido* or *son*). Representation of Native American and Asian American musics are similarly sparse.

As with many essay collections, this one likely arose out of an organic web of connections formed between the editors and those in related fields with similar areas of interest. But the representation of ethnic and racial diversity in *Music Preservation and Archiving Today* reminds us that although the philosophies of authors like Stuart Hall, Howard Zinn, Arjun Appadurai, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Attali (all cited in this volume) have been used by thinkers interested in postcolonial approaches toward knowledge production and consumption, the citation of such authors does not necessarily mean such modes of analysis are present. Yet, in a cultural moment when a blockbuster movie like *Black Panther* evinces suspicion about the durability and value of museum collections for racial minorities, and an article by Ashley Farmer in the *Chronicle Review* describes “the weight of being the only person of color in the room surrounded by images and artifacts of America's favorite colonizers,” simply relying on professional connections to recruit authors for a set of essays is insufficient when the editors' stated goal is to “make the process [of preservation] easier to understand.”³ Most people do not have individual circles sufficiently ethnically and racially representative to force them to confront all factions of the music community. As a result, although this volume opens new techniques to study economically or politically disadvantaged communities, its archive is conspicuously closed in certain other directions.

Readers will benefit from the strategies and case studies presented in *Music Preservation and Archiving Today*. I hope the book is widely read so that the techniques described are used to open the archive in unexpected ways by scholars, students, archivists, and community members. Perhaps a follow-up volume might be constructed to address the greatest philosophical issue confronting archival outreach today: how to make all researchers see themselves in the potential cultural narratives the archive presents. By focusing on that question, we might find a different repertoire of strategies—or we might find that the same things work if employed in new directions—but we will never know unless we try.

³ “These Items Aren't for Sale” scene, *Black Panther* (Marvel Studios, 2018); Ashley Farmer, “Archiving While Black,” *Chronicle Review*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Archiving-While-Black/243981>.