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Issues of description and access for the Graystone and other collections at the Detroit Sound Conservancy

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Abstract:

In this mixed case study research paper, I examine how Community Archives deal with issues of access and difficulties of description, especially with hard-to-describe materials. I first discuss the general role of a community archive. I then discuss some of the issues faced by community archives through the lens of three collections at the Detroit Sound Conservancy (DSC) that are complicated when it comes to matters of description. The case study part of this project is based on my own experience working on collections at the DSC and from interviews with Michelle McKinney, the Archivist at the DSC. The first DSC collection I discuss is the Club Heaven Soundsystem collection, which preserves the history of a primarily Black LGBTQ club in Detroit. The second collection I discuss is the collection of the Graystone International Jazz Museum & Hall of Fame, a former museum in Detroit. The final collection I discuss is the Jazz Scrapbook Collection, which is a collection of preserved liner notes that were put together by a record store in Dearborn that preserves the history of mostly unknown Black artists, many of whom were part of the Great Migration. Based on my interview with Michelle McKinney, I also discuss how issues of suspicion, sustainability, and outreach affect Community Archives.

Title

This project is a mixed case study research paper where I examine how community archives, in this case, the Detroit Sound Conservancy, deal with issues of access and difficulties of description, especially with hard-to-describe materials. The case study part of this project is based on my own experience working on these collections at the Detroit Sound Conservancy (hereafter abbreviated to DSC) and from interviews with Michelle McKinney, the Archivist at the DSC. I will discuss the general role of a community archive, some of the issues faced by community archives, and three collections at the DSC that are complicated when it comes to matters of description.

Community archives seek to serve the archival needs of a local community and usually specialize in a certain topic or range of topics. Community archives arise because of mistrust of traditional archives and often represent the collections of, or collections relevant to a marginalized group, although some local archives also consider themselves to be community archives. The article "*To suddenly discover yourself existing*": *Uncovering the impact of Community Archives* argues that "Community archives empower people marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions with the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts." (Caswell et al., "to suddenly discover yourself existing": *Uncovering the impact of Community Archives* 2016 p57) Essentially, while a Community Archive might also be a local archive, most Community Archives focus on the collections that represent, belong to or are a relevant to a marginalized group that is often not represented in a traditional archive. Community Archives can represent ethnic, racial or religious groups, a Community Archive might also represent the collection of a marginalized gender, or

the collections of a group marginalized along the lines of sexual orientation. (Caswell et al., 2016 p61)

An example of a marginalized group that would be better represented by a Community Archive is the LGBTQ community. The LGBTQ community has long been poorly represented and described by the Information profession. An example of this type of marginalization might be the Library of Congress classifying “homosexuals” and “transsexuals” under a “see-also” heading of “sexual perversions”. (Baucom, *An exploration into archival descriptions of LGBTQ materials* 2018 p70) As a result of this, the LGBTQ community may fear going into the archive, or fear that an archive might try to make the material less accessible. another example could be racial and ethnic majorities that fear lack of access or being “judged” in a traditional archive. Issues of description arise from the historical marginalization of these communities. The appropriateness of the language used is representative of this type of marginalization. However, sometimes the language preferences in a community can change. An example would be the word “queer” which was used pejoratively in the past but has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ community. (Baucom, *An exploration into archival descriptions of LGBTQ materials* 2018 p71) Conversely, some terms used to be seen as “fine” but are now generally considered to be pejorative, such as “oriental”. (Caswell et al., 2016 p61)

It’s best to ask a community what terms they would consider appropriate for description. Many traditional archives have very out-of-date metadata and finding aids, whereas community archives that are more in touch with the communities they serve usually have more up-to-date description. Still, there is tension between historical accuracy and modern sensibility. Typically, it’s best not to change the language used at the time as that is historical. Rather, many archives, both traditional and community, use disclaimers.

An example of a difficult-to-describe collection at the DSC is Club Heaven Soundsystem. Club Heaven was a “legendary and primarily Black LGBT after-hours club in Detroit.” (The club heaven sound system: Restoring a Detroit legend 2019) According to Michelle, “The club Heaven is basically artifact-based. We only have the speakers and the sound system. And we have a few DJs of mixes, that are on tape cassettes. There are a few, maybe one or two oral histories. So that’s a very slender collection.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle KcKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy* 2022) The nature of the collection makes it difficult to preserve, describe accurately and make accessible.

The history of the club and the collection related to it are important because the club existed at a point in musical history when there was a shift from disco to house and then finally to electronic music. Michelle said in our interview, “You know, those it was the actual crack this the line that people went over, and it that collection in the mixes that we had was right at the hearing. Yeah, you can see that you can see then the little bit that we have, you can see the innovation and the tunes that they were playing, you know, you see oh, okay, this is really electronic music here.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle KcKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy* 2022) The club was also primarily a gay club, frequented by the LGBTQ community and therefore much of its history is invisible. (*Club Heaven Sound System* 2021) Issues concerning this collection would be the nature of describing the materials of this

collection, overcoming the historical marginalization of this community, and the “suspicious” nature of the community, in Michelle’s words, “this community is so invisible and underrepresented and suspicious”. (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle KcKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy* 2022)

A second collection at the DSC worth discussing is the collection of the The Graystone International Jazz Museum & Hall of Fame. The Graystone was founded in 1974 by James Jenkins, a retired bus driver who had a love of Jazz Music. The Museum was long financially unstable, often running on a shoestring budget, and moving locations several times. After the death of Jenkins, the Graystone closed in the early 2000s. “Some of the artifacts –photographs, posters, records, musical instruments, paperwork, historical research, and physical materials from the **Graystone Ballroom** itself (torn down in 1980) — were left in a local warehouse by the last board president. The rest of the artifacts were left in the Book Tower, the last location of the museum.” (Graystone Jazz Museum 2021)

The DSC salvaged the Graystone collection in 2015. The collection is difficult to describe because it was created by a salvage operation, which was conducted under duress. According to Michelle, “Greystone that's a good one (to discuss in terms of difficulty of description) because it's in such a crazy condition. And the person who collected it was not an archivist. So he didn't preserve important things about it and plus, he salvaged it so it was in a difficult environment full of mold and water dripping and stuff that was just massively messed up.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy*)

The condition of the collection and the nature of the salvage operation make this collection difficult to describe, and difficult to make accessible. Michelle further described the hectic nature of the salvage operation to me, “So he's just throwing it into boxes, archival boxes, hoping that's going to save them and it is really, you know, the way he put them into these boxes, where he sorted and plus there's like 20 boxes, a vertical file. But the vertical file totally unprocessed. A lot of it is photographs that don't need to be in a vertical file. So many mixtures in one file folder. So that is what is making it a difficult collection to parse out.” The nature of the Graystone Jazz Museum collection, the fact that the original museum was created by a community member rather than a professional, and the hurried nature of the salvage operation all combine to make the Graystone Collection difficult to process and describe.

I’ve worked on the processing of this collection, and many of the folders and boxes are totally disorganized, and the materials often have no relationship to each other. Much of the material does not have archival value. There’s also an element of “suspicion” being an issue with regards to preservation. Much of the collection cannot be processed because the last owner’s son does not want it to be made accessible, even though he did not care about the materials degrading in the Book Tower. (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy*)

The final collection I will discuss is the Jazz Scrapbook Collection. This scrapbook collection is a collection of preserved liner notes that were put together by a record store in

Dearborn. Many of the liner notes are arranged by the artist but are otherwise unrelated, which makes this material difficult to describe and make accessible. In my interview with Michelle, she acknowledged the difficult nature of this collection, “Well as we found out, a lot of those people that are talked about in those in those scrapbooks they are not well known at least not anymore, and they're probably more regional or local area for wherever they were than national.” (McKinney & Kelly, Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy)

Looking through the collection there were some artists from Detroit and the Midwest, but a lot of them were from the Mississippi River Delta. There are some artists that migrated along the train lines, and we can actually see that they were first making records in the South, but ended their careers making records and playing music in Detroit. Michelle and I discussed the historical context of the Jazz Scrapbooks in our interview, “and people they emigrated according to those train lines. So these people that are in these books are probably better known in Arkansas, St. Louis, Mississippi, and Birmingham. Those were the states that came up to the Midwest, especially to Chicago and Detroit because of the work. So I feel like the last one thing that makes them difficult is that they're probably not well known. So it's hard to do research on them.” (McKinney & Kelly, Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy) The scrapbooks are not only important in a musical sense, they are important from a historical perspective, as they are a physical representation of the Great Migration, the movement of Black and African Americans from the Southern states to the North in search of work and to escape discrimination.

To further complicate describing this collection, a lot of the records were independently produced, or from very small pressings of 5000 records or so. Some records have no “record” but are referenced in the scrapbooks, but the LPs themselves could be destroyed or lost, or just moldering in someone’s collection somewhere. So in the Scrapbook collection we have unknown or mostly unknown artists, all of whom were Black and African Americans whose legacy has been poorly preserved, As Michelle said in our interview: “So that's, that's what makes it so that the scrapbooks are very valuable. And they are the ones these are like race records almost. So that's why that's gonna be a difficult collection too. But it'd be it's a goldmine at the same time” (McKinney & Kelly, Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy)

Towards the end of my interview with Michelle, we discussed three issues in regard to the DSC collections, and small Community Archives in general, the three main points we discussed were issues of suspicion, sustainability, and outreach.

Michelle discusses the nature of systemic racism, and how this makes the Black and African American community suspicious of archives in general, even community archives. She also discussed her own difficulty in preserving her husband’s collection. Her husband had been a Jazz musician in Detroit, and while he did not achieve fame, he did achieve local notoriety. “And I will say that of the stuff that's in here. It really has not been donated by black people. That’s, that's a real problem in the black community. They're suspicious, and I was suspicious. And when they started telling me when I was looking to preserve my husband’s materials, we can't help you and I realized a lot of it was systemic, you know, that they just didn't have the vision for that. And they (the black community) didn't value the city they were in because they didn't

control it. Because all those black people in here so get back we try to keep you pressed down anyway. Oh, in the black community, it is because they have this. They are geared to think that they're going to be underrepresented and cheated and tricked.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy*) The issue was that no archive wanted to preserve the collection of a black musician. So that’s where a community archive comes in. In the article, Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content “Writing, Saving and Sharing our Histories” the authors discuss similar issues of suspicion in British Community Archives. “For years some young Black people have faced the forces of racism and its contradictions and have been ashamed to identify their Blackness as a positive attribute. Victims of the assimilation process, their lack of recognized history has rendered them invisible, thereby disinheriting and undermining their sense of Black British heritage.” (Flinn, Independent Community Archives and community-generated content 2010 p40) It would seem that suspicion on the part of marginalized minorities is not just an issue at the DSC or at American Community Archives.

Another issue facing the DSC is sustainability, funding and access to trained staff are constant issues for Community Archives. When I asked how sustainability impacted matters of description and access, Michelle said “Community Archives do not have professional people who can design procedures and stick and work them and stick to those procedures. So me being one person - So that kind of access. When you have professionals who can design numberings enumeration systems who can design take in and workflow systems. A lot of community archives don't have that there because there are people who are impassioned collectors, but they don't have people who are in their community who understand that music and who are actually archival professionals.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy*) Michelle and I ended our discussion by noting the difficulty of overcoming suspicion in the community. There’s a need to educate the community as to the role of a community archive. “They have to educate. So education and sustainability. And if you don't educate you won't get sustainability. They won't matter the people know So really, the root of the problem is raising awareness that you are valuable. Your voice is important.” (McKinney & Kelly, *Interview with Michelle McKinney at the Detroit Sound Conservancy*)

Citations:

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