

Review essay: DIY music archiving

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Review Essay: DIY Music Archiving

Community Custodians of Popular Music's Past: A DIY Approach to Heritage. By Sarah Baker. New York: Routledge, 2017. 198 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. Hardcover \$140.00, EPUB \$27.48. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-138-96120-3; EPUB ISBN 978-1-315-65992-3.

Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-it-Yourself, Do-it-Together. Edited by Sarah Baker. New York: Routledge, 2015. 252 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. Hardcover \$155.00, EPUB \$28.98. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-138-78143-6; EPUB ISBN 978-1-315-76988-2.

Music Preservation and Archiving Today. Edited by Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. 210 pp. Softcover and EPUB. Softcover \$40.00, EPUB \$38.00. Softcover ISBN 978-1-5381-0294-7; EPUB ISBN 978-1-5381-0295-4.

The management and preservation of music archives have flourished in the United States over the past three decades, and we have seen an increase in publications that specifically address appraisal, arrangement, description, and preservation issues within the context of music archives. It is important to note that most collecting activity in music archives stems from the manuscripts tradition; the personal papers of great composers have been a collecting focus for many repositories until very recently, when the larger mission to accurately document American society has opened doors for the documentary output of women, LGBTQIA, and people of color, to name a few. In the same vein, local popular music archival projects have emerged on the American archival landscape over the past few years.¹ Repositories, such as the DC Punk Archive at the District of Columbia Public Library² and the Louisville Underground Music Archive at the University of Louisville Libraries,³ have also increased their collecting of local music scenes.

This review essay takes a closer look at three recent publications that focus on the preservation of music archives, especially popular music repositories' collecting activities that fall outside the scope of more traditional archival repositories. Two books by sociologist Sarah Baker examine DIY ("do-it-yourself") music archives from the scholar's perspective. Baker currently holds a faculty appointment with the Griffith Centre for Cultural Research at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia. Her background is in popular music, youth, and heritage studies from the sociological perspective. *Community Custodians of*

Popular Music's Past: A DIY Approach to Heritage is an in-depth analysis of twenty-three DIY music archives and archivists that author Sarah Baker visited in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. In *Preserving Popular Music Heritage: Do-It-Yourself, Do-It-Together*, edited by Sarah Baker, authors outside the archival profession explore specific issues relating to grassroots archives through their work at “unofficial” repositories such as the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame and the Australian Jazz Museum.

The third and most recent publication, Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson’s edited volume, *Music Preservation and Archiving Today*, addresses the growing phenomenon of local music collections from the perspective of American archivists and conservation professionals who have built popular music collections. Both Guthrie and Carlson work at Rice University’s Fondren Library. Guthrie is archivist and special collections librarian and Carlson is metadata coordinator; they are both involved in local music preservation projects as part of the scope of their work at Rice University. These three publications add unique perspectives to the growing body of literature on music archives, especially because the analyses come from a mix of users, creators, and scholars of archives and cultural production. Their understanding of how and why we preserve records of enduring value enhances current views on the genesis of popular music archives, as well as on their value to the greater historical narrative.

In *Community Custodians*, Baker examines the rich contributions of “bottom-up, community-based interventions into the archiving and preservation of popular music’s material history” (2017, p. i). She takes the reader through a well-researched theoretical framework that arranges popular music preservation efforts in a continuum of practice. In her words, “the practice of archiving and curating popular music’s past in archives, museums and halls of fame can be located on a continuum that registers levels of intentionality and professionalism, recognizes the role of vernacular knowledge and skills in the preservation of popular music heritage and accounts for important acts of collection and display that occur outside the realm of mainstream heritage institutions” (2017, p. 9). This is Baker’s core argument, and the main take-away for archivists who work with popular music materials: fandom that extends to heritage preservation can be a useful tool when developing new collecting areas and embarking on the documentation of popular music. Additionally, as collections grow in size and scope, she advocates for involving fan communities in the archival construct because of their expertise and commitment to a genre or an artist.

Preserving Popular Music Heritage, an edited collection of essays and the earliest of these books, presents a broader scope of the “do-it-yourself” music archives movement, also based on Baker’s interviews and visits to twenty-three DIY archives in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and North America. If anything, the volume could be interpreted as an introduction to the deeper analysis

that occurs in *Community Custodians*. The book is divided into two sections: the first presents the theoretical underpinnings of community-led heritage preservation activities through the lens of popular music archiving; the second includes a collection of essays written by amateur archivists and curators who are supporting and developing the different DIY repositories represented in the book. Overall, this book illustrates the importance of community work in DIY heritage practice, which the editor credits with its survival given the importance of archives to connect with a community of fans and music lovers. She phrases this spirit as “do-it-together,” as grassroots music archives cannot grow or even survive in a vacuum.

In contrast, *Music Preservation and Archiving Today* focuses on the DIY archives experience through a more traditional American archival lens. The editors present short essays from archivists in larger established institutions, such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the University of California, Los Angeles Library Special Collections, which engage their local music communities in exciting and fruitful archival and community documentation projects. The book is divided into three sections: “Documenting Local Music Communities,” “Leveraging Archival Materials,” and “Outsider Music Preservation.” The first two sections center on the issues and processes behind building local music archival programs, while the third discusses preservation efforts outside the archival profession. This is, to me, the most interesting part of the book. The authors reframe the work of independent record labels, of scholars collecting bootleg mixtapes, and of reissuing records as forms of preservation—clearly redefining what “preserve” means for those within archival practice and opening the conversation to include these efforts as valid and sometimes singular options for preserving meaningful music that otherwise would escape the archivist’s grasp.

DIY Ethic

As a whole, these publications provide insightful viewpoints on archival work, especially the essays and chapters written by individuals who are not archivists by training. The authors’ backgrounds range from university professors in media and cultural studies, to sociology and ethnomusicology, and their contributions as outside beneficiaries of archival discourse can deepen our understanding of critical archival functions such as appraisal, collection development, and outreach. While *Preserving Popular Music Heritage* clearly served as the genesis for *Community Custodians*, both titles present strong cases for embracing amateur and DIY heritage concerns and practice in our everyday work. Oddly enough, *Music Preservation* brings together the entire spectrum of archival practice (DIY through professional archivists), and the topics discussed in each chapter work well in explicating the nuances of preserving music

archives. As someone deeply immersed in the preservation and access of jazz archives in the United States, the arguments developed in these titles give me new perspectives on appraisal, affect, and inclusion at a time when making sure our collections represent the rich tapestry of human experience is critical for maintaining our relevancy in the twenty-first century.

Baker's interpretation of the DIY ethic is a key take-away from both of her books and speaks to the spirit in which nonarchivists take it upon themselves to build institutions that focus on heritage preservation for the sole purpose of honoring and celebrating music and musicians who have made an impact in their particular communities. DIY archivists do not wait for larger organizations to document their communities and their specific interests; they build collections by taking matters into their own hands and reaching out to fellow popular music enthusiasts. Passion and enthusiasm drive this work, and professional practice usually becomes an aspiration given DIY archivists' lack of training and the absence of an institutional infrastructure to support their collections. This is an essential element in the grassroots approach to archival work, and Baker takes it a step further by calling it "activist archivism." The need to create collections and material culture that mainstream institutions (represented by the sound recording industry and institutions such as archives and museums) do not support or value serves as a political statement that speaks to the need to actively ensure the diversity of voices in the historical record.

Baker portrays mainstream institutions as canon-building enterprises that, for many valid reasons (collecting scope, financial interests, or broader institutional mission) do not collect materials that fall outside an established repertoire, genre, or era that only ends up favoring a segment of the population. Hence, DIY archives act as rescue sites for bands, musicians, and genres important to distinct communities that are preserved for their celebration, use, and enjoyment. Baker writes, "the work of the DIY institution augments and builds upon national strategies at a community level and fills gaps they have identified in the public records collected at authorized institutions" (2015, p. 11). Guthrie and Carlson provide a counterpoint to this line of thinking. *Music Preservation* includes essays from large academic and public institutions where many local music preservation projects have emerged.⁴ This is, perhaps, a manifestation specific to the practice of archival administration in the United States and a model that challenges Baker's assumptions that larger institutions are disconnected from their immediate communities. Nevertheless, the reader will find good examples and models for developing a local music archival project and, hopefully, avoid pitfalls encountered by the authors, such as addressing collections' conservation issues without having the skills or expertise to do so, the difficulty in planning for long-term growth given precarious funding, and the constraints that an all-volunteer labor force places on accomplishing larger projects.

A Continuum of Practice

It is interesting to see Baker frame the difference between DIY and official archives as a continuum of practice that flows from the unofficial and informal end of the spectrum to the institutional and authorized extreme. This distinction is not quite as sharp in Guthrie and Carlson's volume, likely due to their background in American archival practice. Baker makes a good starting point for setting up a popular music archival program: recognizing and partnering with DIY archives and archivists can make our own local music collections more robust and inclusive. By inviting amateur archivists and DIY repositories to participate in the larger archival narrative, we acknowledge their contributions to our broader mission, where meaningful musical activity is happening. Communicating with collectors and amateur archivists is a regular occurrence at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University where I work; some individuals have a strong connection to jazz, and their lifelong pursuit leads them to collect LPs, 78s, posters, concert programs, clothing, musical instruments, napkins, and other odds and ends that represent their experiences with jazz. It is difficult for us to maintain ears and eyes on all musicians, bands, radio stations, and festivals. Filling our collection gaps while being more inclusive both in practice and in the historical record is a win in my book.

Affect in the Archives

Baker defines "affect" as the mutual emotional relationship between an individual and the materials in the archives (2015, p. 46). This is another meaningful contribution to the conversation on building and managing music archives. Guthrie and Carlson do not discuss affective notions of archival work, but for Baker, "feelings of love, care, and emotion between the volunteers and the things they are looking after result in a different kind of archival and/or musical space, one in which affect is fostered, and indeed, privileged. Thus affect itself makes a contribution to the enterprise of cultural preservation" (2015, p. 47). I have witnessed this close emotional connection in my own work with music archives and their users. We should think of ways to incorporate affect as a category of analysis as we assess the enduring value of potential acquisitions, or as another vital tool in outreach and information literacy activities. I have personally experienced deeply emotional responses from my interactions with materials within our collections. For example, I was assisting with mounting Ella Fitzgerald's wig and gown onto a mannequin for a large commemorative exhibit that featured the Institute of Jazz Studies' most significant holdings. In the process, I happened to take a whiff of the hairpiece and smelled Ella Fitzgerald. It smelled like a grandmother would, and it sent chills up my spine.

I realize this is not the common denominator, but people do have visceral reactions to documentary heritage, especially toward material culture, and more so when looking and interacting with musicians' memorabilia and unique belongings. So, why not acknowledge this connection to artifacts and documents as we appraise and manage archives? Baker makes an excellent case for the human/feelings connection, factoring in the reality of our existence and the hard work we do in the name of humanity to open our eyes to more nuanced collections.

Communities of Practice

The application of "communities of practice" to the DIY archiving and local music scene crowd makes another interesting take-away from these three publications. Baker, Guthrie, and Carlson see the DIY approach to archives and preservation as a natural outcome of the work that volunteer archivists and curators do to build and preserve their preferred genres of popular music. The sense of community drives these volunteer archivists to learn on the job, rally around a common cause, and find alternatives to professional archival practice that work for their particular environments (2015, p. 51). Communities of practice are defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."⁵ Baker uses this model to explain how knowledge and collections grow within DIY archives and how these networks become vital to their survival. While insightful and logical, this view of how DIY archives work also applies to the larger archival profession in the United States. We have long-standing theoretical approaches to the management of archival materials, and these theories become standards and best practices via the work we do at the Society of American Archivists. We band together as a profession, develop solutions to larger professional issues, and keep up with the rapid changes in how the historical record manifests itself.

Missing the Mark

While certainly not within the scope of Baker's research, her lack of familiarity with the American archival enterprise creates room for her to strengthen her grasp about how archives function and how archivists preserve and create access to the historical record. For example, Baker heavily relies on media studies and sociology literature to build the framework for her analysis of DIY archives. To an archivist, these books feel like they're missing the target. The presence of archival literature in both books is minimal, and not giving this analysis an archival perspective takes away from the important points Baker makes about communities of practice, how archives are built and maintained (some of us started as DIY sites in people's basements!), and what professional archivists

struggle with to make history a bit more accessible. Guthrie and Carlson, on the other hand, provide a more robust archival analysis of documenting local music communities, especially in chapter 2, “Establishing a Regional Music Archives at the University of Illinois,” where the authors draw on documentation strategy and institutional functional analysis to shape the archival framework behind their local music project.

Baker’s narrow view of archives takes away from both of her books’ arguments in favor of a deeper understanding and appreciation of DIY archives. Additionally, Baker has an exclusively European/Australian view of heritage management organizations and more specifically of archival practice. While our goals are the same—preservation and access—American archival practice differs significantly from that of its European/Australian counterpart. Baker makes assumptions about official and authorized archives that do not apply to the management of archives in the United States, and she actually paints an inaccurate picture of financial stability in institutionally affiliated archives. For example, in the introduction of *Preserving Popular Music Heritage*, Baker bemoans the lack of resources and institutional/government support that plague DIY institutions due to their amateur origins. She laments the fact that DIY archives have “limited funding, too few hands on deck to assist in cataloguing and preservation projects and not enough space to house the volume of materials being donated” (2015, p. 13). These working conditions describe about 90 percent of the archives I’m familiar with in the United States, regardless of institutional affiliation. Nevertheless, the books open up interesting conversations about affect, fandom, and communal ownership of cultural heritage that are worth incorporating into our professional practice.

Why We Need DIY

Reading these accounts of music archiving from perspectives across a broad range of institutions has been both a humbling and an uplifting experience. It is reassuring to know that we are not alone in the fight to collect, preserve, and maintain a robust and diverse historical record. At the Institute of Jazz Studies, we are fortunate to be well known and respected by the jazz community of practice, and, more often than not, we are the first number jazz heads call when they need a place to donate their extensive collections of sound recordings and memorabilia. Baker succeeds in framing the amateur/professional relationship as a continuum, as it should be. While we do have the infrastructure, training, and resources to grow our collections, we sometimes lack the activist community-building ethos of DIY archives. These informal networks of knowledge and connections play a crucial role in their survival, and they rely on them to keep their archives afloat and the materials coming in the door. Guthrie and Carlson’s book illustrates how

these communities have partnered with archival organizations and built significant collections that otherwise would have never appeared on archivists' radar.

Baker also makes a point to highlight the importance of affect, or feelings, in the context of popular music heritage. The love and devotion that fuels amateur archival programs often keep their staffs engaged, the doors open, and the collection growing. These materials produce an emotional response within their respective communities, and this should be factored into professional archival practice. We cannot ignore the emotional connections that people make to documentary heritage, and some measure of affect would be useful to incorporate into appraisal strategies as well as into public programming. Making meaningful connections with the public we serve is as important as applying arrangement and description standards to our finding aids. Because we can all be a little bit country, and a little bit rock 'n roll.

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NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, publications such as Cristine Paschild, "Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs," *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 125–42; or Joanna Newman, "Sustaining Community Archives," *Aplis* 25 (March 2012): 37–45.
- ² For a broader description of the DC Punk Archive, visit <https://www.dclibrary.org/punk>.
- ³ See <https://library.louisville.edu/archives/luma> for details on the Louisville Underground Music Archive.
- ⁴ Institutions represented in the book include the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Library and Archives, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, Rice University, and the University of California, Los Angeles.
- ⁵ Baker draws on Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner's work on "Communities of Practice," <http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice>.

Agents of Empire: How E. L. Mitchell's Photographs Shaped Australia

By Joanna Sassoon. Melbourne, Aus.: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017. 260 pp.
Softcover. \$44.00. Illustrations (some color). ISBN 978-1-925333-73-2.

Archivists and scholars of photography are often faced with the challenge of representing and interpreting the legacy of colonial practices of image production, dissemination, and dispersion. A key question in this context is understanding the role of photographs in constructing knowledge about colonized lands and cultures as well as their enduring effects in current understandings