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Comparison of Region Specific Audio Collections

The mission and type of cultural institution dictates how collections are cared for and presented to the public. A science museum will handle a documentary about space in a very different way than a media archive because of the differing operating missions and what their relationship to the material is. I looked at how audio collections that are tied to geographic locations are handled by traditional research libraries, archives and independent music labels. These organizations treat the material relatively similar, but with very different approaches to making the material accessible.

Appalshop is a media collective in rural Kentucky that was started in 1969 as an economic development project funded by the “War on Poverty” program. Initially founded to train Appalachians in media production so that they could find jobs elsewhere, the program instead used these skills to document and celebrate Appalachian culture. To broaden the reach of the music that they had begun to record, the June Appal recording label was founded. From 1974 to the present, the label has released work by Nimrod Workman, Carla Goer, Morgan Sexton, Buell Kazee, etc. and allowed the sounds of Appalachia to have a voice in the culture dialogue and its influence has filtered into other styles of music.

The June Appal Records master material is all stored in the temperature controlled vault that is located at Appalshop’s facility in Kentucky. This is either on

½” or ¼” open reel magnetic tape and stored on their original hubs and containers. Appalshop sells this material through their website, with the formats dictated by what the material was mastered and released on. For works before 1976, the access copies are all on vinyl, Cassette starting in 1980 and CD starting in 1997. Because of this, access can be impeded by not having the proper playback device for the material.

The Richard Hell Papers document the life of Richard Hell, lead singer of the Voidoids, member of Television and oft-cited figure in the early punk rock scene in New York City in the early 1970s. Malcolm McClaren, manager of the Sex Pistols, claims that it was Hell’s personal style that influenced the iconic safety-pin adorned ripped clothes aesthetic that the Sex Pistols help make the uniform of punk. The audio material that is held at the Fales special collection library contains various master material, commercially available albums, live recordings on cassette and DAT and various demos. The material is on a variety of formats: ½”, ¼”, DAT, and cassette. However, what exactly is in the collection is unknown as Fales has not had the ability to make access copies of the material and it has only been catalogued on a format level.

The Fales Special Collection is located at New York University’s Bobst Library. The Fales Library and Special Collection collects a variety of subjects, from Cookbooks to rare books and manuscripts to the Downtown art scene in New York. The Downtown collection The Downtown Collection “...is such an attempt to document the downtown arts scene that evolved in SoHo and the Lower East Side during the 1970's through the early 1990's. The movement, taken as a whole, was

very diverse, and its output includes literature, music, theater, performance, film, activism, dance, photography, video, and original art.¹ The Downtown collection is perhaps the most media rich of Fales' collections, with a large amount of audio, video and film coming in with different collections. The media is stored in a temperature-controlled environment at the Fales Library, and for material that has been processed, inspected and re-housed in archival containers. The Richard Hell material, however, is stored in file boxes that have yet to be processed and assessed. In talking to Brent Phillips, much of the preservation and production of access copies is dictated mainly by the ability to obtain grants. This means that the uniqueness of the object and its fragility will dictate what gets preserved and becomes accessible and what will have to wait. The library is open to NYU students and faculty and credible researchers with the material accessible in the reading room on the second floor of the Bobst Library.

Dischord records was founded in 1980 by Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson to document their band The Teen Idles. With the success of this initial 7", they decided to use the profits to document other bands and Dischord was born. Dischord has documented the punk and post-punk scene in D.C., releasing albums by hugely influential bands like Minor Threat, Fugazi, Jawbox, Q and Not U, etc. They have released 163 albums from over 50 D.C. area bands in their 29 year history and served as an inspiration to many with the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethic that runs the label. Everything is based in Arlington, VA and is still housed in a bungalow-style house affectionately known as the "Dischord House".

¹ Fales Website <<http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/about.htm>>

The collection is made up of live documentation, master album material and various demos. All of this material is stored on the second floor of the Dischord House in Ian Mackaye's former bedroom. Focusing on the album master material, it is all housed in the original container and hubs with accompanying mastering notes within the container. These are all stored upright and spine out on the shelf. The room is not climate controlled but steps are currently being taken to normalize the conditions and bring them somewhat into archival standards. All of the master material is still commercially available, on CD, digital files and Vinyl. With the current resurgence in vinyl, the label is systematically re-mastering the albums from the original tape to re-press on vinyl. None of the albums that Dischord has released is unavailable as they have consistently provided access to all the material in their collection, time and money willing.

In comparing these three institutions, a very clear difference became apparent: access. The record labels/archives used access as a motivator for preservation and care. The material is being properly preserved (or steps were taken in that direction) to keep the material accessible and available. On the other side, the research library is making sure the material is cared for but access to the material is tricky and stalled by the bureaucracy of a private university and the lack of funds available to the library. Even if the material is preserved with access copies in a variety of formats, the only way to gain access would be on-site at the library. In a sense, the library was restricting access by imposing restrictions on how the material can be heard.

Another key difference that relates to the access difference between the three organizations, is how much copyright affects the collection. For Fales, copyright is a huge consideration in how the material is handled as many different factors can possibly infringe on copyright. Because the material is either bought or donated to the collection, the donor has the ability to stipulate how the material can be accessed. In addition, many different third party rights play into the restrictions on the material as collections usually contain documentation of not only the donor's material but anyone associated with them. In the case of the Richard Hell audio material, the other members of Television, the Voidoids, etc would have equal claim to the copyright on the work and possible rights violations could arise. For the labels, rights are tricky but currently not an issue. Appalshop has contracts with the artists whose material that release and are allowed to keep the material accessible and available for purchase. Dischord has no contracts with the bands, but are on good, almost familial terms with most of them, so no issues have arisen by the material being accessible and available for purchase. However, Fales may end up in a better position in the long run as copyright issues may arise from various estates as rights get passed on to heirs.

In terms of their general care and conservation, the library does take good care of the material. However, due to the large amount of material that is competing for care and attention from trained archivists, there is definitely a big difference in the attention paid to the material. Dischord and Appalshop, because of their small sizes, can maintain their audio material with a minimal amount of money spent periodically on upkeep and migration. Fales, on the other hand, must compete for

increasingly rarer grants to actively preserve the material and migrate it. Unless a wealthy researcher decided they want to hear the Richard Hell material and pay for the migration, it may be awhile before this material is digitized and available on the NYU servers. Dischord and Appalshop are both still actively selling the material and attempting to stay current by migrating to new formats, which allows them to preserve the signal. It seems that smaller organizations, with a very clear focus is better suited for care of material that is tied to a location versus large bureaucratic libraries where the material is competing with resources that are spread thin.