Building a Relationship with the National Museum of African American Music: Vanderbilt University's Academic Archive Purchasing Fund

Oct. 21, 2022  SEMLA Annual Conference, Tallahassee, FL
Academic Archives Purchasing Fund
Vanderbilt University/National Museum of African American Music collaboration

**Chancellor-Initiated Program, Organized by the Provost’s Office**

- Goal of the initiative:
  To support an expanded collection of books, scores, sound recordings and material objects related to African American music. This collection will be available for loan, display and study at the museum and will also serve as an important resource for scholarly research on Vanderbilt’s campus.

- Proposal-based initiative that involves 3 parties: VU faculty, VU librarian, NMAAM staff member

- Proposal reviewed by a VU faculty committee, then forwarded to Vice Provost and Dean of the School of Music for final approval.

- Initiative’s proposal authored by Cynthia Cyrus (Musicologist, VU)
NMAAM's mission is to educate the world, preserve the legacy, and celebrate the central role African Americans play in creating the American soundtrack. NMAAM was born out of a proposal from the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce in 2002, as a way to celebrate and preserve African Americans' influence on music and provide residents and visitors with diverse cultural offerings. The National Museum of African American Music broke ground in early 2017 and officially opened in 2021.
Summary of Collections Purchased

• John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie Collection & additional A/V materials at auction
• Janet Jackson Memorabilia Collection (Two Janet Jackson costumes)
• Rissi Palmer Collection
• Dr. Yusef Abdul Lateef Collection
• Hip Hop Collection of Posters
• Otha Turner Collection
Overview: This collection contains manuscripts, photographs, scrapbooks, and realia. The photographs are extensive, documenting Gillespie's entire life and career.

Purchased from James Cummins bookseller

Highlights: Middle East Scrapbooks of State Department tours starting in 1956; Dizzy's Appointment / Address books for the years 1975-1979, 1985-86, 1989-1992, heavily annotated by Dizzy; 3,000+ photographs/snapshots
Janet Jackson (1966- )
American singer, songwriter, actress, and dancer

Purchased at Auction – Julien’s

This collection contains two black coats made for Janet Jackson's 1990 Rhythm Nation Tour. One coat was worn by Jackson during the opening sequence of the tour while performing "Control" and "Nasty." The other coat is a similar, second version of the first coat.
(No, this isn’t the costume that malfunctioned during the 2004 SuperBowl)
Rissi Palmer (1981-)

One of the most important African American Country Music singer-songwriters since 2000.


Host of Apple Music Country's show *Color Me Country Radio*

Purchased directly from artist

**Overview:** This collection contains songwriting notebooks, photographs, CDs, and outfits from African-American country music artist Rissi Palmer. The notebooks in particular document the majority of Palmer's songwriting career.

**Highlights:** Diaries; Costumes (two from music video performances and one from her debut performance at the Grand Ole Opry in 2008).
Dr. Yusef Abdul Lateef (1920-2013)

- Played tenor saxophone and flute, he also played oboe and bassoon, both rare in jazz, and non-western instruments such as the bamboo flute, shanai, shofar, xun, arghul and koto.
- Innovator in the blending of jazz with Eastern music
- Wrote *Repository of Scales and Melodic Patterns*
- One of the earliest black artists to embrace Islam
- Visual artist

Purchased from Lateef’s wife, Ayesha Lateef

Overview: Musical instruments (tampuri, sitar), music manuscripts, teaching notes, business correspondence, book and method drafts, drawing, personal book collection

Highlights: pedagogical materials; 300+ scores (1960-2010), lead sheets, arrangements; drawing; drafts of *Repository of Scales*
Items from Lateef Collection

Jana‘at

Tampuri

Coltrane Remembered
Overview: 13 items including Concert Posters, flyers, photographs 1973-1990

Acquired at Auction – Bonham’s

Supports NMAAM’s focus on the 50th anniversary of Hip Hop
Otha Turner (1903-1993) Collection

Otha Turner is one of the last well-known fife players in the vanishing American fife and drum blues tradition

**Overview:** Photographs, correspondence, press coverage, promotional materials, musical instruments

**Highlights:** Handmade fife, search warrant, documentation of musical and educational program on Otha Turner held in Nashville

Acquired through a friend of Otha Turner - Bill Ramsey, Nashville attorney
Challenges

• Staffing levels of both institutions
• VU’s ability to overwhelm NMMAM’s staff with requests and inquiries
• VU’s desire to influence exhibit content
• Staffing changes at NMAAM
• Increased work to process special collections; managing staff work loads
• Digital infrastructure improvements needed at VU
• VU relatively new at community engagement
Collections-Related Successes

• Two Buchanan Library Fellowship courses: *Archives and Storytelling: Exploring the Life of Dizzy Gillespie through Photographs & The Diverse World of Yusef A. Lateef: From Archives to Performance*

• Guest visits Jon Fadis / Maxine Gordon

• MUSL 3155: Women and Music, taught by Cynthia Cyrus: Students in course indexed the Rissi Palmer diaries and wrote a biography.

• Sophomore “Mystery Excursion” to NMAAM

• Free VU student admissions to NMAAM

• Additional donations of photographs of jazz musicians from Hank O’Neal and David Berger

• Internships (VU students at NMAAM)
Other Successes

• Collaborative Programming Initiative through the Vice Provost’s Office
• Greater interest in performing the music of African American composers at the Blair School of Music
• 4 Lateef drawings currently on exhibit in the VU Art Gallery
• Student, faculty and staff growth experiences, looking at African American contributions to music through new lenses
• New faculty research interests
Major Jazz Collection
Donation: Phil Schaap Collection

Philip Schaap (1951-2021) - American radio host, who specialized in jazz as a broadcaster, historian, archivist, and producer. He began presenting jazz shows on Columbia University's WKCR in 1970, and hosted Bird Flight and Traditions In Swing on WKCR for 40 years. Jazz instructor at Juilliard.

Collection Highlights:
3,000 Oral Histories with Jazz Musicians
10,000 LPs
6,000 78s
2,000 CDs
3,000 45 rpms
Photos, music scores, discography research/notes, radio broadcasts from 4 stations

Current Status: Digitization of jazz musician oral histories underway; preparing for shipment of physical collection
Discoveries and Lessons Learned

The “Back Drop”

• Recognize that most archives are located within systems of white supremacy, also known as structural racism and are often situated within institutions of power that historically have reinforced systemic oppression.

• Archives have historically been inaccessible or unwelcoming to marginalized groups.

• Archivists and music librarians are an overwhelmingly a white profession.

• Archival collecting has enshrined dominant narratives of rich, white, heterosexual, cisgender men as the most deserving of attention and preservation, while ignoring or erasing narratives of marginalized communities.

• Archival theory is rooted in concepts like provenance that promote social hierarchy and privilege document-creators (those who have the means to create and preserve records) over subjects.
What we can do

- Understand, reflect, and support the institutional missions.
- Understand power structures and differences in staffing.
- Engage collaboratively with marginalized communities, bring an open mindedness to learning and sharing authority.
- Be humble.
- “Show up” and be trustworthy, accountable; don’t promise things you can’t deliver; respond quickly to inquiries about collections.
- Relationships are import; work to prioritize relationships and build in time to reflect on how you can improve your relationships.
- Claim our identity as a white person in a racist society; work to make strategic changes in organizations/communities consistent with anti-racist analysis and vision.
- Admit that this work requires learning from mistakes and be more forgiving of our mistakes and those of others.