Over my dead body: when your local music archive meets donor resistance

Elizabeth E. Reilly, University of Louisville
“Over My Dead Body”

When Your Local Music Archive Meets Donor Resistance

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Donor Challenges

- New audience unfamiliar with archives
- Distrust of anything institutional
- Do not consider their stuff “worthy”
- Need time to “go through” material
- Assume they can donate copies of originals
- Not ready to part with personal collection
Strategies

- Educate about archives
- Promote donations on social media
- Offer help in sorting, selecting, and retrieving
- Introduce idea of promised gifts / bequests
- Pursue oral histories
- Have patience
Joe Conroy gives @luma_project a thumbs up! #utgret #louisville #underground #music

Louisville Underground Music Archive Project shared Sarah-Jane Poindexter's photo.
November 16, 2015 -

Sarah-Jane Poindexter added a new photo to Louisville Underground Music Archive Project's timeline — with Heather Fox.

Archivist Heather Fox featuring LUMA related donations by Paul Curry, Aron Conaway, Ed Lutz, Rhonda Cook, and Ken Burton. Thank you all for helping us build this important collection! Fox now and for generations to come!

Good morning, captains! Kicking off wknd w/ pic of latest donation to @luma_project from @SlintOfficial! Thanks guys!
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SLIDE 1: In 2013, Archives and Special Collections at the University of Louisville started the Louisville Underground Music Archive project to document the local rock / indie / punk and hardcore music scene. With acts like the Endtables, Slint, Rodan, and Will Oldham, the Louisville local music scene has been vibrant since the late 1970s, and was ripe for collecting.

SLIDE 2 - 3: Early on, the LUMA project experienced great support on Facebook and in the local media. Today the LUMA Facebook page has over 1500 likes and we have received over 40 separate collections totaling thousands of individual items. But, as time has passed since the initial wave of enthusiasm, the donation inquiries have slowed and we’re still without significant private collections that we know exist in the community.

SLIDE 4: We’ve encountered a number of different roadblocks to receiving more donations. One obstacle being that much of the community we’re trying to document is a new audience unfamiliar with archives. This lack of understanding has caused some anxiety for people who are unsure about what will happen to their stuff once it’s donated, or at least a general hesitation to participate in the project.

We’ve also observed some distrust of our project as part of a larger institution. Many people in the independent music community have strong “DIY” principles and therefore reluctance in giving up their materials to an archive in a university, which they could see as being far outside their close-knit community.

Quite surprisingly, we’ve also heard from a number of people, even from members of our own Advisory Board, who didn’t think their own stuff was worthy of being donated to an archive. They were unaware of the enduring value of the materials they have collected over the course of their lifetime in the scene. And since many people had not interacted with archives before, they weren’t aware that we’d be interested in preserving and providing access to this particular history.
Another common response to why someone has not yet made a donation to the LUMA project is that they need time to go through their collection. While this is understandable, it’s also a little frustrating, as we’re anxious to collect materials.

Also, many potential donors assume that they can donate *copies* of their material (like photos and flyers), and then retain the originals. Or, they ask if we could scan the originals that they donate, and then provide *them* with duplicates.

And finally, we have heard from a number of people in the community that have significant collections of local music material, that they are simply not ready to part with their stuff yet. We’ve even heard through the grapevine, about a couple responses to the idea of donating to the LUMA project - along the lines of “Over my dead body...”

**SLIDE 5:** Our biggest approach to managing the challenges we’ve faced with trying to collect from our local music community, has been through education. We are actively educating this community about what an archive is, what we do as archivists, and why we do it. We discuss the importance of collecting original items, describe preservation and access, and work to assure people that once their material is donated to this archive, it is in good hands. On our website, at our community outreach events, through promotional materials, and during one-on-one conversations, we are teaching people about the purpose of archives, the archival process, and the value of our project.

**SLIDE 6:** We use social media to promote donations to the archive. We hope that by snapping a photo and posting it to the project Twitter and Facebook accounts (with the donor’s permission), trust in our project grows among those who may feel hesitation. Seeing a photo of a friend or musician they respect may encourage them to donate their own materials to LUMA. Along the same lines, we’re in the practice of naming each collection in the LUMA project after the person or band who donated it. Not only does this work to inspire others, but it also gives recognition to the donor – many of which have a strong, personal connection to the material they are handing over.

**SLIDE 7:** In response to some donors expressing uncertainty about what to give us, we have personally assisted in sorting through materials, and physically retrieved boxes from the donor’s home.
To those people who may respond “Over my dead body” to the idea of donating their collection to the LUMA project... well, by introducing the idea of a promised gift or bequest, we let them know that that can certainly be arranged.

We’ve recently started an oral history component to the LUMA project, focusing on people who participated in the early years of the music scene. We hope this works to not only fill informational gaps left from materials not yet collected and to continue to build the collection during a lull in donations, but also to express our admiration and sincere interest in these people, their experiences and contributions to the local music scene. By collecting their oral histories for this project, perhaps they may one day wish to donate to us the physical items they have collected.

And finally, when trying to document a local music community that consists of non-tradition donors, many who are in the prime of their lives, it’s important to have patience. We have come to appreciate that we must operate on donors’ timelines. And hopefully the hard work we do now will pay off down the road.

SLIDE 8: Thank you