

# Bridge Over Troubled Water

## Archivists of Color Create Change

**Steven D. Booth (National Archives and Records Administration), on behalf of the Archivists and Archives of Color Roundtable**

With the current state of the economy, it's no secret that colleges and universities are cutting programs geared toward the arts and humanities. This was the case in February 2012, when the Office of the Provost/Academic Affairs at Columbia College of Chicago announced plans to eliminate the Center for Black Music Research (CBMR). Founded by music educator and scholar Samuel Floyd Jr., CBMR is an academic, innovative, performance-based oasis dedicated to "covering all idioms in black music of the United States and the African diaspora" through scholarship.



Minnie Tate, at age 14, was one of the two original members of the Fisk Jubilee Singers who had not been born a slave (1872). *Courtesy of CBMR library and archives.*

For nearly three decades, this distinctive institution has served the community by offering publications like the peer-reviewed *Black Music Research Journal*, seminars on award-winning artists Michael Jackson and Ray Charles, and performances featuring the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble. But the heart of CBMR is the library and archives.

### Center for Black Music Research's Collections

Directed by Suzanne Flandreau, the library and archives encompasses an assortment of rare and special materials, which include sheet music published by the Martin and Morris Music Company; manuscripts of the first black bandmaster in the U.S. Navy, Alton Augustus Adams Sr.; unpublished works of Negro spirituals arranged for instrumental and choral ensembles; sound recordings of jazz pioneers, such as Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker; and a wealth of other resources documenting the musical excellence and achievement of blacks.

In addition to offering standard library procedures—reference, instruction, and outreach—the repository provides funding for scholars to do research. Due to the specialty of the collection, materials are non-circulating. Having worked as an intern at CBMR before attending graduate school, I can attest to the vast holdings and amazing services the library and archives provides.



**Above:** Brochure about the CBMR archival collections.

**Top of page:** Unpublished MS of a three-piano arrangement made by Florence Price of her *Concerto in One Movement* (1934). The MS was one of three MS piano reductions used to re-create the full score and orchestration for performance in 2011. *Both images courtesy of CBMR library and archives.*

### A Call to Action

News of CBMR's dire fate circulated across the Archivists and Archives of Color Roundtable (AAC) listserv thanks to the group's former co-chair Tamar Evangelista-Dougherty, who also included an article from the *Chicago Tribune* outlining the potential closure and a plea for letters of protest (Howard Reich, "A Blow to

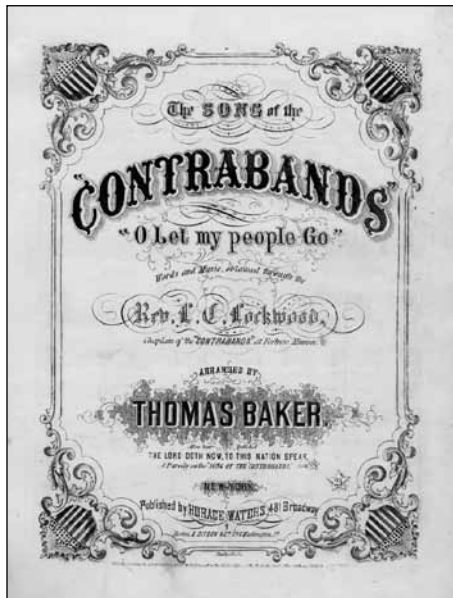
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Black Music in Chicago,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 5, 2012). “No other institution on the planet studies, archives, documents, disseminates, records, and performs music from the vast diaspora of African-American culture as comprehensively as the Center for Black Music Research,” Reich wrote.

Messages of displeasure about the decision trickled in, but we also felt a strong call to action. Since its inception twenty-five years ago, AAC has remained the ethnic and racial conscience of SAA, advocating for diversity in the profession and the documentation of minorities within historical records. Although the group has undergone several name changes (it’s been called the Minorities Roundtable and the African American and Third World Archivists Roundtable), the mission to promote the preservation of archival materials pertaining to people of color has remained the same.



Cover of “Song of the Contrabands,” the first Negro spiritual published in its entirety (1862). *Courtesy of the Dena Epstein Collection, CBMR Library and Archives.*

Led by Jamillah R. Gabriel, we started an online petition at [www.change.org](http://www.change.org), a website that “empowers anyone, anywhere to start, join, and win campaigns to change the world.” Courtney Chartier, outgoing co-chair, drafted the petition, which read:



The CBMR’s New Black Music Repertory Ensemble with pianist Karen Walwyn and conductor Leslie B. Dunner performing the recreated score of Florence Price’s 1934 *Concerto in One Movement* (Harris Theater for Music and Dance, Chicago, 2011). *Photo by Jonathan Mathias, courtesy of CBMR Library and Archives.*

... [We] understand that Columbia College faces some difficult financial decisions. However, the loss of the CBMR would be significant. The CBMR stands alone in its collections on African-American music. Archival repositories are the jewel of any college or university; they bring luster to the story of our heritage. With Columbia College’s strong music department, closing the CBMR would be a blow to the history of American music, and the reputation of the school.

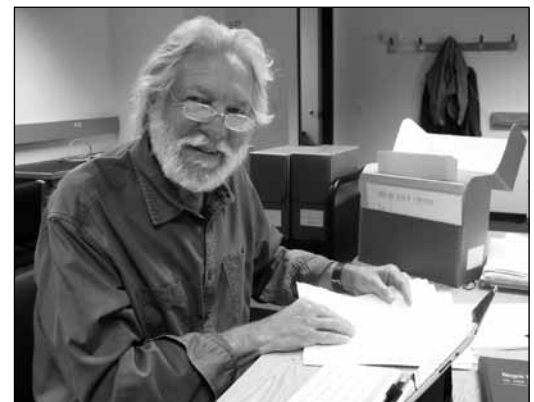
Archivists, librarians, educators, and black music connoisseurs from New York City to Nova Scotia signed the petition. Supporters also expressed their concern through comments on the site. “The CBMR is integral to affirming and restoring the significance of diaspora and social change through music,” one commenter wrote. Another added, “The historical, cultural, and intellectual value of this institution goes far beyond dollars and cents.” Organizations like the Theatre Library Association joined the cause and co-sponsored the petition. By the end of the signing period, AAC had received 551 signatures in a matter of weeks.

### The Roundtable as an Agent of Change

The efforts of the roundtable and other supporters did not go unnoticed and thankfully were not in vain. In June, the Board of Trustees of Columbia College Chicago released its final decision to keep the doors of CBMR open. The caveat of this announcement included structural change within the organization, future funding

obligations, and necessary collaboration with academic programs. Although the response is not ideal for CBMR, the life expectancy for this cultural treasure has increased, thus providing researchers and scholars the opportunity to access the wonderful collections housed at this repository for years to come.

This is only one example of how roundtables can be effective outside the walls of SAA. Lending support to institutions that are in need of assistance brings awareness to unfortunate situations while increasing the visibility of the profession beyond the stacks—all of which are important to the survival of archives, collections, and jobs. Even the smallest good deed, like a petition, can help. The members of AAC are certainly proud of our work as change agents, and we’re looking forward to playing a greater role in the future. ■



Filmmaker and journalist James Carrier does research in the CBMR Library and Archives for his forthcoming documentary film on Dena Epstein (2011). *Courtesy of CBMR Library and Archives.*