

MODULE 22

**ENGAGING USERS
WITH ARCHIVES:
PROGRAMS THAT
GET RESULTS**

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Appendix C: Case Studies

Programming to Build Connections and Collections

By Michele Casto

DC Punk Archive, Special Collections, DC Public Library

The DC Punk Archive started as an undertaking by the DC Public Library to acquire donations of collections documenting the local underground music scene, a community that was otherwise unrepresented in the Library's local history collections. The project evolved to include a robust programming component. Intentional community engagement meant that the project has been informed and inspired by the culture we are attempting to document—community ori-



Figure 11: Logo for the DC Punk Archive

ented, inclusive, cooperative, and participatory—an approach that also aligns perfectly with our mission as a public library.

The initiative was part of a larger departmental focus on documentation of underrepresented communities and voices (LGBTQ, independent local music such as punk and go-go, black churches, and underground newspapers and art spaces). We were interested in an inclusive project, one with a broad scope that would tie together the past and the present without devolving into mere nostalgia. The DC punk scene of the 1980s is revered and quite well documented, and while we were interested in bringing in collections that represented this period, we wanted to cast a wider net to include lesser-known stories that existed before, during, and after the '80s hardcore heyday. The team that initiated this idea included Michele Casto and Lauren Algee from Special Collections, as well as staff from other areas of the library system, including branch librarian Barbara Dougherty and music librarian Margaret Gilmore. With this kernel of an idea and an enthusiastic team who could bring their various strengths to the table,



Figure 12: Hemlines at the first Library Basement Show. *Photo by Mike Maguire.*

the project took off with the help and support of the community. James Schneider, a filmmaker working on the documentary *Punk the Capital*, helped us connect with his contacts by arranging a preliminary meeting with members of the local music community. We presented the project idea to this group and solicited their feedback, while also making note of their concerns. Drawing on their input, we developed a strong project plan, and several of these community members became ongoing advisors to the project.

In preparation for the project launch, we developed our own promotional and outreach strategy. We made fliers and zines, started a Twitter feed, and maintained an email list to send periodic project updates, such as announcements about new donations and upcoming programs. Our team also attended external events such as DC Zinefest and other festivals to raise awareness about the project. We launched the project in October 2014 with a series of programs, starting with a punk show in the basement of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. The Library Basement Show was so popular that the attendees insisted we host more; this became an ongoing bimonthly series featuring local bands. The shows have been more than just a means to promote the collecting project. They have been a way to involve the



Figure 13: Scenes from the fifth-anniversary celebration. *Open house photos by Martha Ball; outdoor photos by Chris Ruhlen.*

current local music community in the project and in the library and to expand people's expectations of what libraries and archives can be.³⁷

Since the launch in October 2014, the DC Punk Archive project has enjoyed an outpouring of support from the local music community: donors contributing collections, musicians performing in the basement shows, and fans and researchers coming to the library to enjoy both. We have received donations of every size, from a single item to a basement full of an individual's life's work, and combined they now measure approximately 128 linear feet. Our popular bimonthly Library Basement Shows, and the additional programming we have offered every October, have also drawn more than 4,000 attendees to

³⁷ Selected press coverage of the project includes: John Kelly, "The Stuff of D.C. Punk History Becomes Part of the Public Record," *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-leading-archive-of-dc-punk-rock-is-going-to-washingtons-library/2015/08/10/8aa7e984-3f61-11e5-bfe3-ff1d8549bfd2_story.html, captured at <https://perma.cc/T52X-WNSD>; Bill McKenna, "Punk Music Archive to Preserve Washington DC Music History," *BBC.com*, last modified January 15, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-30821333/punk-music-archive-to-preserve-washington-dc-music-history>; and Michele Casto, Bobbie Dougherty, and Margaret Gilmore, "Punk at the Library: D.C. Public Library Spreads the Word with Basement Shows," *American Libraries*, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2017/05/01/punk-at-dc-public-library/>, captured at <https://perma.cc/ECC8-A8F2>.

date. Every October, we celebrate the anniversary of the project launch with a month-long program series that has included film screenings, music history walking tours, exhibits, author talks, panel discussions, and open houses. In the summer of 2019, we were invited to participate in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall as part of a celebration of the social power of music, with a focus on DC punk and go-go.³⁸ Our section of the festival included a display of materials from the music collections, a live demonstration of music digitization, and a series of interactive programs. In October of 2019, we celebrated the fifth anniversary of the project with an event at the Georgetown Neighborhood Library, which included an open house with a display of our collections, an outdoor photo exhibit, and a concert, with a DIY merch table. Our project's goal has expanded beyond documentation of DC's rich music history to supporting and championing the ongoing creative work of the local independent music community. Programs have been the key activity in strengthening the relationship between the library and this community.

Archivist Ray Barker joined the team in 2017 and has activated a dedicated group of volunteers and interns to help process the collections. The collections in the DC Punk Archive (processed and unprocessed) have been in constant use since the launch of the project. Visitors have included: classes from museum studies, history, and music history programs; academic researchers from the DC metro area and from other states and countries; journalists and filmmakers; and archives and library school students researching special collections. We have also been contacted by many institutions interested in undertaking similar projects and seeking advice about how to start. Many of our visitors are simply fans of DC music who have heard about the project and are curious to see what we have. We have also had tourists visit from across the country and around the world, from Florida to South Dakota and the United Kingdom to the Netherlands. We have even had local artists use the collections as inspiration.

Another measure of the success of the DC Punk Archive project is how DC Public Library Special Collections staff has used it as a model for additional programming and collecting initiatives. Special

38 Anna Diamond, "The Social Power of Music Will Take Center Stage at the 53rd Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival," *Smithsonian Magazine*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/social-power-music-takes-center-stage-53rd-annual-smithsonian-folklife-festival-180972495/>, captured at <https://perma.cc/59BU-HRGL>.

Collections archivists Derek Gray and Ray Barker have started related projects documenting go-go music and the local underground art scene, respectively, and programming has been central to the effort to build relationships with collectors and other members of those communities. The strength of these projects is derived from community support, and the programs give the community the means to actively participate in the projects. Programs help reach people who might otherwise not have felt any connection to special collections or archives. The programs serve collections goals of encouraging donations and use, and they certainly have an important promotional function. Some of the emphasis we give to programming stems from our function as a special collection within a public library, where community engagement and collections are both equal priorities. This project fuses both aspects of the institutional mission through collections- and community-driven programming.

“Yarn Bombing” to Cultivate an Archival Garden

By Jessica Lacher-Feldman

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The foundation for the programming described here is an exhibition that was intended to support more fruitful collaboration among multiple people across the library, both in and outside of Special Collections, as well as engage others throughout the community. The exhibit itself was focused on creating a single, collections-based thread (plants, flowers, gardening) and building upon it through the tastes, expertise, interests, and collection areas of multiple curators. Exhibits of this kind can be challenging, as they can take a great deal of coordination to develop, but with careful planning and an exhibition plan that helps define the parameters from the beginning, they can be very rewarding. The exhibit featured flowers and other flora representing many subjects, formats, and eras from the collections. Library staff wanted to maximize the exhibit’s presence and simultaneously engage new users, so they hosted a series of events during the exhibition to maximize the “green” theme.

The exhibition’s kickoff was a “garden party,” strategically scheduled in the bleakest part of the Rochester winter and promoted as a way