

Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 1 Number 1

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Received 11 April 2020; Accepted 11 April 2020

DIVE IN THE ARCHIVE

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The Cornell Hip Hop Collection: An example of an archival repository

ABSTRACT

Those seeking to study and understand hip hop's history can familiarize themselves with the growing number and variety of archival efforts focused on the documentation of hip hop culture and its multiple forms of expression. This article summarizes the history, mission and scope of one of those efforts, the hip hop archives at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and places it in the context of other archival projects centred around hip hop.

KEYWORDS

academic libraries
archives
museums
hip hop education
digital collections
hip hop archives
hip hop culture

The collection that would eventually become the founding core of Cornell University's hip hop archives began in the late 1990s as a private collection assembled by Johan Kugelberg, an independent author, curator and collector based in New York City. As a cultural historian and former recording industry executive, Johan had seen how much documentation about twentieth-century American musical genres, such as jazz and rhythm and blues, had already been lost due to indifference or neglect. Concerned that hip hop's history could suffer a similar fate, he started looking for materials from the culture's early years in New York City (c.1973–84), purchasing items from

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1. Kugelberg and Conzo have told this story publicly in a variety of settings, such as hip hop studies conferences and events. For example, on a panel with Afrika Bambaataa and Jorge 'Popmaster Fabel' Pabon held at Cornell University on 11 April 2011, Conzo spoke about the process of seeking a home for the archive: <https://www.cornell.edu/video/afrika-bambaataa-hip-hop-and-radical-peace/s1220>. The relevant remarks appear at 20:28. Accessed on 10 April 2020.
2. Cornell's opening celebratory conference and performance 'Born in the Bronx: A Conference Celebrating Hip Hop' was held at Cornell University, 31 October–1 November 2008. Participating MCs, DJs, dancers, filmmakers, journalists and photographers included Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Caz, Grandwizzard Theodore, Roxanne Shante, Popmaster Fabel, Tony Tone, Joe Conzo, Jr, Pebble Poo, Disco Wiz, Charlie Ahearn, J. Rocc and Jeff Chang. Academic panellists included Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal and Jennifer Stoeber. See, for example: 'Cornell Celebrates Hip Hop', *Ithaca Times*, 29 October 2008, https://www.ithaca.com/entertainment/cornell-celebrates-hip-hop/article_bb553648-c480-5c16-9818-2401240893ce.html. Accessed on 10 April 2020.

the era's MCs, DJs, dancers, filmmakers and other collectors. Between 1998 and 2006, he assembled a collection of rare audio recordings, photographs, event flyers and manuscripts, with the goal of transferring the collection to an institutional archive. Johan's efforts were well underway by 2002, when pioneering MC Grandmaster Caz of the Cold Crush Brothers introduced him to Bronx photographer Joe Conzo, Jr, who the *New York Times* has called 'the man who took hip hop's baby pictures' (Gonzales 2005). Joe and Johan formed a partnership, working together to enhance Johan's collection and publishing the book *Born in the Bronx: A Visual Record of the Early Days of Hip Hop* (Rizzoli 2007).

Johan's 'Born in the Bronx' collection would become the foundation of Cornell's hip hop archives...but only after Johan and Joe spent more than a year visiting other repositories in or near New York City, hoping to find a permanent home for the collection in a library or museum. According to Joe and Johan,¹ none of the curators or directors with whom they spoke wanted the collection. The rejection of the archive by New York institutions prompted Johan to look beyond the metropolitan area, which is how he and I met in January of 2006 and began making plans for the collection's move to Ithaca, New York.

Cornell Library's decision to accept the collection was informed by the belief that hip hop's history was too important to ignore. Because several institutions had declined, it seemed urgent that a library or museum begin to assist with hip hop's preservation before materials began to disappear. As was the case at many universities, Cornell's curriculum already included several courses on hip hop culture within multiple departments, including its Africana Studies and Research Center. The opportunity also dovetailed with a growing emphasis on documenting contemporary music within Cornell Library's Rare and Manuscript Division, where the archives would be based. The 'Born in the Bronx' materials arrived at Cornell on 12 July 2007. Shortly thereafter, I assembled an initial advisory group composed of Cornell and regional hip hop scholars and local hip hop heads. The purpose of this advisory team was to ensure the collection's connection with academic and community programmes, and to help plan for an inaugural event the following year.²

But these facts of the collection's move to Cornell – like the oversimplified narrative linking hip hop's birth to a single party held in the Bronx on 11 August 1973 – gloss over the complexity of the journey, the many individuals who contributed and the intricacies involved. The presence of Afrodiasporic cultural creativity and innovation within institutions of higher education with Eurocentric origins was and remains problematic. Any such institution seeking to assist with the preservation of hip hop would have much to prove. Cornell was and is no exception.

Hip hop is not only a genre of music but also a multidimensional culture that serves as a form of expression for marginalized populations around the world. A culture invented by poor black and brown youth, it represents a core of artistic practices and aesthetics, but also a set of lifestyle principles that encompass not only art, music and dance, but fashion, language, philosophy and politics. With Cornell's acceptance of the collection came profound responsibilities to the communities who created and continue to sustain the culture. The collection's presence required deep reflection on how to incorporate hip hop's values and a necessity to examine assumptions embedded in the structures of institutional research libraries and archives.

The collection's curators sought to build a preservation and outreach model responsive to these perspectives, developing a programme that diverged from

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what were – especially back in 2006 – traditional activities in rare book and manuscript libraries. This model relies on four components: open facilities, teaching by practitioners, community outreach and free digital access.

PUBLIC ACCESSIBILITY

Cornell's campus and its libraries are open to all; access does not require affiliation with the university. Members of the public can enter the University's library buildings and use available resources without having to present Cornell faculty/student identification cards. This most basic element of public openness ensures that the Hip Hop Collection is accessible to academic and community audiences alike.

TEACHING BY THE PRACTITIONERS

The Hip Hop Collection has worked to prioritize the participation of DJs, MCs, dancers, writers, journalists and other community members by including them in the process of documentation and teaching. The goal has been to connect hip hop's artists and participants not only with the archive but directly with the curriculum, changing who has the power to speak on behalf of hip hop in a university setting and upending traditional teaching hierarchies. Over the years, the collection has partnered with faculty members to bring pioneers and other artists into classrooms to tell their own stories. We have invited members of the Rock Steady Crew to teach workshops to students, co-taught week-long seminars with working DJs, paid pioneers to remote videoconference with Cornell classes, hosted MCs so they could open and present their archives to the public and involved artists in contributing their own cataloguing data to descriptive projects. Offering a platform from which the culture's creators could share their narratives while expressing hip hop's values and aesthetics in their own words has been an essential component of Cornell's programme.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The archive has also made community outreach a focus. Unlike many instruction programmes within academic libraries, Cornell's hip hop archives reach beyond college students and faculty members. When hip hop artists and originators lecture for Cornell students, the Hip Hop Collection frequently organizes companion public programmes, ensuring that opportunities to learn from visiting artists are available to the regional community. The collection's assistant curator, Ben Ortiz, continually works with groups outside academic circles, offering educational programmes and learning opportunities for children from the Greater Ithaca Activities Center, public library teen learning programmes, local annual Black Lives Matter events, regional community hip hop festivals and programmes for at-risk or incarcerated youth. The ability to talk about hip hop's origins and elements to experts and laypersons alike requires specialized skills and detailed knowledge. As a passionate hip hop head from the age of six, Ben came to work in the archive without previous library experience, but with deep connections to the hip hop community, expertise in youth education and a commitment to social justice. Without a dedicated staff member grounded in hip hop's values – a job role still unique within research libraries – the Hip Hop Collection would be unable to fulfil its responsibilities to the community.

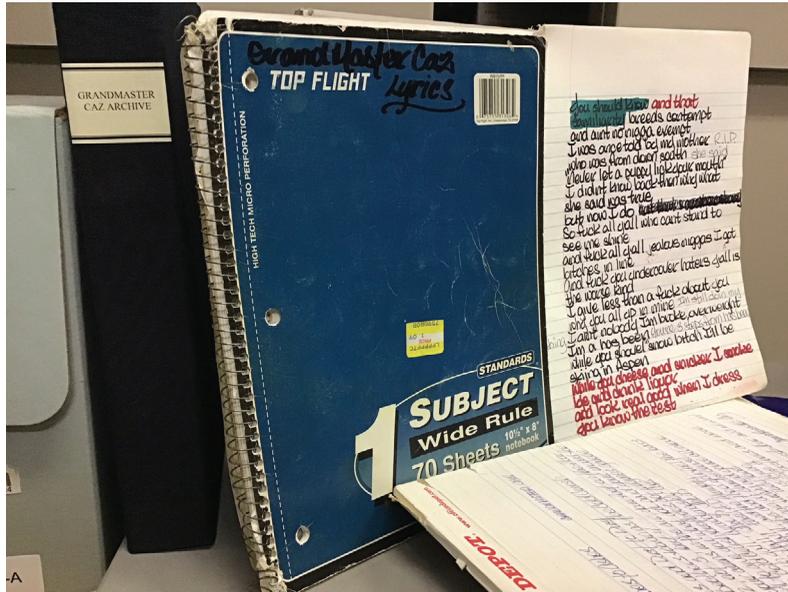


Figure 1: Rhyme books and lyric sheets from the archive of Grandmaster Caz, Cornell University Hip Hop Collection.

OPEN DIGITAL ACCESS

The collection has been steadily opening its archives online, to the extent copyright law and artist permissions allow. Although high-quality, searchable and permanent digital archives are costly to build and maintain, Cornell Library has made the investment in order to make the primary sources of hip hop's history freely available to the public. Digital collections opened as of April 2020 include Joe Conzo's photographs of the Bronx (1978–83), hundreds of early hip hop party and event flyers, annotated vinyl records from Afrika Bambaataa's 1970s music collection and the files of Def Jam publicist Bill Adler. Scanned but currently in the process of being catalogued and uploaded are more than 18,000 images by hip hop photographer Ernie Paniccioli, hundreds of unique *Wild Style* images from the archive of Charlie Ahearn and tens of thousands of additional items from the Adler archive. These digitized collections enable anyone seeking information about hip hop history to follow their curiosity by browsing through the archive per their own interests, using keyword searches to uncover and study artefacts for themselves. For example, 1970s and early 1980s hip hop flyers can be searched by performer name, flyer artist name or by venue, while metadata associated with Joe Conzo's images enable the retrieval of photos taken at the same venues listed in the flyers.

As a research archive (as opposed to an academic institute or museum), materials from the hip hop archives are made available by request in Cornell Library's special collections reading room six days per week. The collection receives a steady stream of visits from students researching papers, scholars writing books or dissertations, filmmakers working on documentaries and hip hop heads looking at artefacts by or about their favourite artists. Visitors just need to let us know what they would like to see. Like most research libraries and museums, the Hip Hop Collection shares content through exhibition loans when borrowing institutions meet international guidelines required

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for the security and protection of cultural materials. Those working to create displays in spaces without secure facilities are welcome to use facsimiles made from Cornell's digital files. Artefacts from the Cornell archives have been loaned to institutions in New York, Paris, London and Tokyo. Materials from the collection are also regularly featured at Cornell, such as the exhibition opened in February 2020 in Cornell Library: 'More than Reported: Images of Black Women from the Cornell Hip Hop Archives' curated by Ben Ortiz in collaboration with Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo (also known as rapper/producer Sammus) (Beduya 2020).

Although materials about hip hop have been making their way into libraries since the 1980s, there were no focused programmes dedicated to preserving unique hip hop documentation in research libraries at the beginning of 2006, when planning for the Cornell hip hop archive began. This is no longer the case. The past decade has seen the launch of multiple initiatives in US libraries and archives focused on the preservation of hip hop's history. Large collecting institutions, such as the New York Public Library, now include hip hop archives among their acquisitions (see, e.g., Peet 2016 and Ugwu 2019). Multiple regional documentation efforts have appeared, including archives on Houston area hip hop at the University of Houston Libraries,³ a collection on Virginia hip hop in the College of William and Mary's Libraries (Necci 2013), a collection on Minnesota hip hop at the University of Minnesota Libraries,⁴ the New Orleans bounce and rap music collection at Tulane University's Amistad Research Center (Thomson 2014) and the Massachusetts Hip-Hop Archive at the University of Massachusetts Boston's Healey Library (Mason 2016), to name only a few. Many of these library efforts began as personal research or independent archival projects, showing that without the dedication and passion of individual collectors, much historically significant material would have likely been lost.

Library institutions are not the only site of hip hop's preservation and commemoration. Harvard's Hiphop Archive and Research Institute supports hip hop scholarship from within an academic institute and includes books, magazines and other memorabilia.⁵ Museums, too, are increasingly foregrounding hip hop. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame was the first museum to create a major exhibition on hip hop's history in 1999, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture regularly includes hip hop in its galleries, with many of its artefacts drawn from collecting efforts launched by the Smithsonian Institution in 2006.⁶ Finally, a building that will include the Universal Hip Hop Museum is expected to break ground before the end of 2020, bringing the hip hop community one step closer to the long-held dream of a dedicated museum in the Bronx (Kreps 2019).

Individual collectors, creators and documentarians everywhere continue to gather materials in personal collections, helping to ensure unique elements of hip hop's history are preserved. Hip hop's global reach is reflected by an increasing number of community-based collecting initiatives around the world, such the Manchester Hip Hop Archive in Manchester, England (Unity Radio 2017) and the Northside Hip Hop Archive in Toronto, Canada.⁷ Community-based archival activities such as these fulfil an important role in expressing values specific to hip hop priorities, styles and histories of particular geographical regions and traditions.

These are only a few examples of hip hop's archival initiatives, an area of activity that continues to grow. On 28–29 February 2020, representatives from many of these collecting organizations and initiatives gathered in New York

3. *Awready!: The Houston Hip Hop Conference*, University of Houston Libraries, 27 – 28 March 2012, <https://sites.lib.uh.edu/hiphop/>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
4. University of Minnesota. Givens Collection of African American Literature. Finding aid to the Minnesota Hip Hop Collection. <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/5/5/resources/338>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
5. Harvard's Hiphop Archive and Research Institute is part of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research with a mission to 'facilitate and encourage the pursuit of knowledge, art, culture and responsible leadership through Hip-hop'. <http://hiphoparchive.org/>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
6. Announced by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History at an event on 28 February 2006, the collecting initiative, 'Hip-Hop Won't Stop: The Beat, The Rhymes, The Life' sought to collect objects from all aspects of hip hop arts and culture with a goal of creating a comprehensive future exhibition. National Museum of American History, Fact Sheet, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/press/fact-sheets/hip-hop-won%E2%80%99t-stop-beat-rhymes-life>. Accessed April 2020.
7. Northside Hip Hop Archive, <http://www.nshharchive.ca>. Accessed April 2020.

8. NYU Tisch School of the Arts, symposium announcement, <https://tisch.nyu.edu/cinema-studies/events/spring-2020/documenting-history-in-our-own-backyard>. Accessed 10 April 2020.
9. Highlights of Cornell's hip hop archives, along with its digital collections can be viewed at <https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/hiphop/>. Accessed 20 June 2020.

City to attend *Documenting History in Your Own Backyard II: A Symposium for the Advancement of Archiving and Preserving Hip Hop Culture*, hosted by the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) programme at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.⁸ The first iteration of 'Documenting History in Your Own Backyard' took place on 19 October 2012 at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Cornell's Hip Hop Collection was a co-sponsor of both the 2012 and 2020 forums, working with Martha Diaz, Director of the Hip-Hop Education Center, who founded and spearheaded these unique programmes. These symposia welcomed archivists, curators, collectors, artists, educators and scholars to discuss archival projects and share best practices with the goal of ensuring the survival of hip hop's archives. At triple the size of the 2012 event, the 2020 gathering was a testament to the energy, dedication and integrity of the growing field.

Since the 'Born in the Bronx' collection arrived at Cornell, its original 7000 or so artefacts have grown to several hundred thousand objects, including the archives of hip hop's photographers, filmmakers, dancers, MCs, DJs, artists, writers, producers and publicists, and independent labels, managers and agencies.⁹ Cornell's archive is only one site for this important work. Just as hip hop is bigger than the contributions of any individual artist, style or region, so does the preservation of hip hop's history require multiple archival, educational and preservation efforts worldwide. No single organization or individual can collect everything on a topic as wide and diverse as hip hop culture. The acquisition, cataloguing, housing, conservation, digitization, outreach and access activities required of archival work are painstaking and resource-intensive. Non-profit institutions and individuals engaged in this work all struggle with sustainability, limited space and constrained resources. As long as organizational efforts are community-connected, there is no limit to the preservation activities that could and should be pursued, and hence no limit on the number of organizations or people needed to help ensure that hip hop's history and contributions are honoured, preserved, celebrated, studied and respected. Working in collaboration, collecting initiatives within and outside of institutions can support each other, thereby ensuring that a greater amount of archival documentation of enduring historical value will be saved. Thanks to the knowledge, passion and dedication behind so many of these efforts, we no longer need to fear that hip hop's history will disappear from the historical record.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Reagan, Katherine A. (2020), 'The Cornell Hip Hop Collection: An example of an archival repository', *Global Hip Hop Studies*, 1:1, pp. 149–155, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00009_1

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