

MIXTAPES FROM HEAVEN: THE GLOBAL DUKE ELLINGTON FANDOM AND THE MUSIC THEY PRESERVED

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Abstract

The Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection of rare and unissued sound recordings at the University of North Texas Music Library demonstrates that, in archival settings, the incidental content that is often deleted from commercial releases is actually “a feature, not a bug,” so to speak. This article elaborates on two reasons for the desirability and necessity of such content: First, it often provides the context necessary to make sense of a given recording, determining a date and release status, especially for recordings that are not well labeled. It also provides lasting evidence of the human activity underlying every aspect of the performance, capture, distribution, and preservation of a recording.

The Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection’s unissued recordings of Duke Ellington and other major jazz artists, packed onto reel-to-reel tapes like the “mixtapes” of decades later, have obvious intrinsic value. Still, preserving and acknowledging the human activity that compiled them adds value: doing so provides a window into the depth and intensity of the “fandom” (or community of fans) that thrived for Ellington even in his sixties, along with the multifaceted efforts to preserve his live performances.

Ellington and his music created an international fan community, and their story augments his own. This article describes historically significant content from the Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection, digitized in early 2016, in the context of the social participation of Baker and other fans and collectors, including the prominent Swedish collector and discographer Benny Aasland. The preservation and description of the collection demonstrates a complementary relationship between archival practice and musicologist Christopher Small’s concept of musicking. Insights from Pauline Oliveros and John Cage further inform an approach to musicking inclusive of incidental sounds and other artifacts of recorded live performance which might otherwise be dismissed as “noise,” but are essential to the full context of the captured performance.

Introduction

“Someone has to be the audience,” said University of North Texas Music Library volunteer Daisy Rogers when asked if she played an instrument herself. Mrs. Rogers made an important point regarding the social dimension of music performance: It is all too easy to treat recorded music — whether live or from a studio — as if it occurred in a vacuum. This approach strips out contextual information and evidence of human participation, not unlike taking the “perfect” photo of a beach sunset while carefully cropping out the other tourists also taking a photo of the sunset, as if striving toward the Platonic ideal of a sunset with the illusion of no intermediary effect of human perception or observation. Someone, indeed, has to be the audience, or the sunset goes unseen — an astronomical event, but not a human one.

Broadly speaking, overlooking the experience of the audience also helps to set the stage for the perennial student question in classes about historically significant musicians, artists, and authors. Who “decided,” for example, that Duke Ellington was so important as to merit close study in jazz history courses to this day? Of course, questions surrounding the establishment and maintenance of a canon require ongoing scrutiny, but

evidence of audience reception partly addresses the retort of “says who?” when historical narratives recognize an artist as an important figure.

The existence of jazz has overlapped with the era of recorded sound and radio, and live concert recordings preserve an immediacy and a participation in the moment for those listening long after the recorded event. Here, collectors and cultural heritage institutions become crucial participants in ensuring that the listening may continue, and the audience may grow. All such agents find a home in musicologist Christopher Small’s concept of *musicking*, which refers to participating “in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing, or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” (Small, 1998, p. 6).

In broadening the scope of musical participation as a social activity, musicking provides a framework that restores to historical recordings the context that archival practice prizes so highly: Not only the materials are important, but also the activities that generated them, and the people who participated in those activities (Society of American Archivists, 2013, p. xv). Understanding a collection and its creator are interdependent, as an archival collection is on many levels an autobiographical entity – hence the imperative for description and structured metadata that addresses those connections. The Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection of Duke Ellington recordings at the UNT Music Library thus provides an object lesson in how the contextual contributions of numerous “musicking” participants complement and elevate the intrinsic value of a significant set of unissued live Ellington recordings.

The tapes also capture messages from Swedish Ellington expert Benny Aasland (who called Baker by the nickname “Bake”), and Staten Island discographer Bob Kumm, who in lieu of a cover letter recorded introductions describing what was on the tapes they sent to Baker. In addition, Houston radio personality Ed Case appears on multiple occasions, both on radio interviewing Rhodes Baker, and as master of ceremonies for an Ellington concert in Houston, Texas. These contacts point to a transatlantic network of Ellington enthusiasts sharing recordings. The existence of such a dedicated community before the affordances of electronic communication is itself remarkable and worthy of study; Baker’s collection preserves tangible evidence of this musicking activity that facilitated the preservation of rare and unissued jazz recordings.

Moreover, even where content has been commercially released, it is of historical interest to have it accessible in “raw” format, which often reveals a different performance order, bandstand chatter, the voices of radio announcers, advertisements, or the war bond appeals that were the reason for many broadcasts. Indeed, the very contextual material that may be discarded from a “refined” recording is often crucial for making sense of it: As *Deep Listening* author Pauline Oliveros noted, “there’s always more to the sound than just the sound” (Andrews and Maloney, 2020). Oliveros was calling attention to the effects of reverberation, but her statement applies broadly to the ambient circumstances of a sound environment. In a similar vein, John Cage observed that “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating” (Cage, 1973, p. 3). Granted, archival recordings and commercial recordings serve different purposes and audiences: For those analyzing or transcribing from the recording, clarity is paramount, and for those listening for enjoyment, artifacts of recording may distract from the sense of a front-row seat. However, archival and commercial recordings are complementary, and a high-quality instance of the latter depends on access to and understanding of the former.

Oliveros' and Cage's comments suggest a holistic approach to the intersecting settings in which musicking takes place: not in a social vacuum, and also not in an environmental vacuum. With that approach in mind, this article details the history and contents of the Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection, and the many stories it tells. Those stories cross geographical boundaries and go beyond Ellington himself, but lead back to him as the unifying focus of such devotion from his fans on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

The life of "Bake"

The creator of this collection, Rhodes Semmes Baker, Jr., followed in the footsteps of his father in several respects: As an attorney, Rhodes S. Baker, Sr. attained the distinction of arguing in front of the United States Supreme Court. He also served as president of the Dallas Art Association, and participated in the campaign that established Dallas as the location for Southern Methodist University, which is now a prominent private university. Notably, Baker Sr. was also an expert art collector (Hart, n.d.), and certainly appears to have passed on to his son an affinity for curating a comprehensive collection of rare, important, and high-quality materials.

Baker Jr., for his part, was born in Dallas on 27 November 1912, and received bachelor's, master's, and law degrees from Southern Methodist University. After serving in the U.S. Army during the Second World War, he worked as a tax attorney with the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. before relocating to Houston in 1951 (Southern Methodist University, 1968, p. 6). It is unclear when he became a devoted fan of Duke Ellington, but working in Ellington's hometown of Washington, D.C. would have availed him of many opportunities to see Ellington and his band, and to hear him via local radio broadcasters such as Willis Conover, Felix Grant, and Emerson Parker. Baker only lived to be 54 years old, and died on 25 November 1967 (Ancestry, n.d.).

An October 29, 1968 press release from what was then North Texas State University (NTSU, now UNT), found in the papers of former One O'Clock Lab Band director Leon Breeden, describes the acquisition of Baker's collection: "Lab Band director Leon Breeden and Music Librarian, Vernon Martin, announced today the purchase of a collection of books, recordings, tapes, and discographies of the work of the fabulous Duke Ellington. The collection was acquired from the widow of prominent Houston attorney, Rhodes Baker. [Mrs.] Baker reports that her husband was an ardent Jazz buff and made a point of collecting everything recorded by the eminent jazz musician." The release goes on to note the One O'Clock Lab Band's recent contact with Ellington when the band played at the White House in June of 1967, thoroughly impressing Ellington, who reportedly vowed to go conduct a five-hour rehearsal of his own band (Leon Breeden Scrapbook 1, 1968).

An initial inventory sent from Vernon Martin to Breeden valued the collection at \$4500 in 1968 (Leon Breeden Scrapbook 2, 1968), or \$33,670.86 in 2020 dollars (US Inflation Calculator, 2020). Even after adjusting for inflation, the sum is arguably quite modest. The collection consists of two boxes of papers, 82 reel-to-reel tapes, dozens of radio airchecks, and hundreds of 78 rpm and LP records. The papers are mainly records of Rhodes Baker's bidding in auctions, along with inventories, and discographies. The reel-to-reel tapes are of particular interest, due to the presence of live and unreleased performance. The press release's description of the reels is strikingly understated in hindsight, as they hold the most rare and unreleased material.

Most of the tape boxes are sufficiently labeled to determine at least some of their contents, but the tapes themselves are densely packed with music. It appears that Baker dubbed recordings wherever there was room on a tape, and many tapes contain four tracks with up to 90 minutes of audio on each track. Studio recordings are juxtaposed with live performances, and commercial releases segue to unreleased material and alternate takes. While the term “mixtape” generally brings to mind cassette tapes from the 1980s and ‘90s, Baker’s reels follow a similar pattern, constituting expertly compiled “mixtapes” of exceptional importance due to the proportion of rare and unreleased content they contain.

Literature

Several resources either lend context to the contents of Rhodes Baker’s collection, or provide a reference for confirming or clarifying the identity of a given recording. First, the Ellingtonia online discography (Discography | Ellingtonia, 2020) and Tom Lord’s The Jazz Discography database (The Jazz Discography, 2020)¹ have been indispensable for identifying performances, verifying contents, and assessing whether recordings have been commercially released.

In addition, the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine captures of the site *A Duke Ellington Panorama* (formerly *depanorama.net*) have provided access to the Duke Ellington Music Society’s *DEMS Bulletin* (Wayback Machine, 2020). Day-to-day itineraries of *The Duke - Where and When* (Palmquist, 2020) helped determine whether an uncertain date was plausible according to Ellington’s known activity around that time.

Since many of the recordings in Baker’s collection originated in Sweden, the blog postings of the Duke Ellington Society of Sweden (Duke Ellington Society of Sweden, 2020) have provided background information about numerous Ellington concerts in Sweden and elsewhere. A section accessible with a membership fee offers access to recordings from Benny Aasland’s collection, but this article does not discuss the recording content since it is not publicly posted. A listing of the contents of the Music Library’s collection is posted and discoverable (Feustle, 2020)² via search engines like Google, though copyright restrictions limit access to on-site use.

Technical process

As the UNT Music Library acquired the Rhodes Baker Collection in 1968, efforts to make sense of the contents have occurred in several iterations. Around 1990, librarian Michael Cogswell (who went on to become Executive Director of the Louis Armstrong House Museum) supervised a project to transfer some of the tapes to Rotating head Digital Audio Tape (R-DAT). As is so often the case in physical preservation media, the reformatting media itself ultimately reached obsolescence, and in the 2000s, librarian Andrew Justice reinvestigated the available information about the reels and R-DATs, with a new inventory prepared.

Funding was also an obstacle on top of the advancing age and obsolete formats of the recording and their R-DAT copies; however, as time passed, digitization became technically and financially feasible. The Music Library explored different options for funding;

1 Accessed via an institutional subscription.

2 The reel-to-reel tapes are described in Series 3.

ironically, smaller projects may be harder to fund, however valuable the materials, due to minimum asking amounts for grants, and the understandable desire by funders to associate their names with large, transformational projects. The Music Library ultimately funded the digitization of the Rhodes Baker reels in early 2016, via George Blood Audio LP in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. Also included were a smaller number of reels from a different Ellington-related collection compiled by former U.S. Foreign Service Officer Dennis Askey. Upon completion of the digitization project, the Music Library received .wav preservation masters, each of which was accompanied by an md5 checksum file for data integrity.

Listening and research

As noted earlier, descriptions provided in and on the tape boxes were generally of some use, but necessarily limited by space. The only way to confirm what was on each tape was to listen in real time, a task which began soon after receiving the tapes, but was greatly facilitated by teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic due to the ability to allocate focused listening time while working at home. Listening to and researching the tapes took a total of four to six months, though regularly interspersed with other duties. In general, the workflow proceeded as follows:

1. For each performance, note in a Google Docs file if it appears to be live or from a studio. For live performances, note tune changes by timestamp (hour:minute:second).
2. Note the names of tunes if recognized.
3. If present, three consecutive tunes are generally enough to identify a live performance (or a set of plausible performances) at Ellingtonia.com, though one exceptionally uncommon title may suffice to isolate a performance date. The Tom Lord discography served as a backup resource if a performance was not listed in Ellingtonia.
4. Continue listening to confirm or rule out performance identification and verify contents.
5. Note release status: If partly released, note unreleased material.

The process of listening and identifying recordings was labor-intensive, and required specialized knowledge in recognizing Ellington's extensive repertory, as well as general dates of certain band members whose presence could narrow a time frame. For example, Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton died on July 20, 1946, so any live recording announcing his presence was made before that date. On the other hand, the presence of Swedish singer Alice Babs provided an immediate signal to browse Swedish dates in the 1960s. Ellington theme songs prior to "Take the 'A' Train," such as "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo," narrowed the time frame for performances, and the evolution of fixtures on Ellington's set lists also suggested a date range: For example, one may note characteristics of the initial release of "Take the 'A' Train" in contrast with its reworking for the album *Ellington Uptown*, and a frequently used phrase ending that bounces across octaves in Ellington's piano solo that situates it in the 1960s.

Findings

Several recordings merit highlighting as being especially illustrative of the contents of the collection and the contextual information required to make sense of them. For example, one tape that was especially packed with content was labeled B-57, on which five out of six performances were listed as unissued in Ellingtonia.com’s discography (Discography | Ellingtonia, 2020). Figure 1 details the contents of tape B-57.

Performance	Date	Release status
Konserthuset, Stockholm Second concert followed by first concert	9 March 1964	Second concert partially unissued, first concert entirely unissued
Civic Opera House, Chicago	10 November 1946	Django Reinhardt feature only, commercially re- leased
Storyville, Boston	Between 23 and 29 September 1957 (Palmquist, 2020)	Unissued
Basin Street, New York	31 December 1954 over- night into 1 January 1955	Unissued
Liederhalle, Stuttgart	12 February 1963	Unissued
Liederhalle, Berlin	15 February 1963	Unissued

Figure 1: Contents of tape B-57.

As tape B-57 illustrates, the reward for this labor-intensive effort was considerable, above and beyond the nearly 60-page log of the contents of the digitized reels. B-57 begins with a spoken message from Benny Aasland to Rhodes Baker, and Aasland announces each of the performances – a benefit not present on most tapes. Following the Storyville performance, Aasland calls the Stuttgart segment “a rather unsatisfactory recording,” but future generations are surely grateful to have it, despite whatever shortcomings Aasland saw in the recording quality. Above and beyond the music, B-57 is evidence of the friendship between the two men, and Aasland’s generosity in sharing Swedish Ellington recordings with an attorney in faraway Houston, Texas.

In contrast, tape B-4 describes a concert in Gothenburg, Sweden, held on November 18, 1958. Consulting the Ellingtonia and Tom Lord discographies uncovered an immediate problem: Ellington and his band were performing in Basel, Switzerland on November 18 (where the recording was listed as unissued), but they had been in Gothenburg on November 6. The tape included an introduction from Aasland identifying the concert as being in Sweden, not Switzerland, but it was worth verifying. The discographies show the content of the concerts on this tour of Europe was highly consistent, so close listening was required to confirm or rule out the date and location. If the recording was indeed from Sweden, there was then the task of confirming which of two concerts on November 6 the recording contained.

Ellingtonia.com shows the first concert as being entirely released, with a handful of unissued selections in the second concert (Discography | Ellingtonia, 2020). Curiously, the very information that definitively identifies the recording as the second concert in Gothenburg is listed as being unissued: Near the end of the concert, Ellington notes that the date was singer Ozzie Bailey's birthday, which is November 6, and the band plays "Happy Birthday" for him. This addition to the program only occurs in the second concert. Perhaps the protracted legal struggle over the copyright status of "Happy Birthday" in the United States hindered its release in some small measure (as one more track in need of copyright clearance), but it is a valuable service to listeners to include with recordings some of the evidence that helps make sense of them.

Closer to Rhodes S. Baker, Jr.'s home, tape B-23 contains a recording of Ellington's storied Fargo, North Dakota concert of November 7, 1940, capturing at least one iteration of recordings from that concert in collectors' hands in the 1960s. The blog of the Duke Ellington Society of Sweden (DESS) thoroughly details the story of the Fargo concert's long journey to commercial release, from its recording by Jack Towers and Richard Burris on portable equipment to initial bootleg releases beginning in the sixties from a "very poor tape" which Dick Buckley "gave to someone who visited him in Washington." Towers facilitated legitimate releases beginning in 1975, though the concert was not released in its entirety until 1990 (Fargo Nov. 7, 1940, 2020).

The provenance of this item in Baker's collection is unclear, but his copy of the Fargo concert is plausibly connected to Dick Buckley's "very poor tape." It contains notable issues of balance, particularly in selections featuring vocals from Ivie Anderson. However, the full, unedited spectrum of sound in this raw recording exceptionally captures the energy and excitement of Ellington's appearance in Fargo. Digitizing archival collections such as Baker's ensure that listeners can access both the polished commercial releases (which were clearly a labor of love, from the description in the DESS blog post), and the unedited recordings where even the flaws help to document the experience of that winter night in North Dakota, through crowd noise, the acoustics of the venue, and the position of Towers and Burris' recorder. In this way, the commercial releases and archival recordings are complementary, with each aiding the understanding and appreciation of the other.

Baker's collection also captures audio from numerous telecasts in the 1960s, including Ellington's appearances on NBC's *Tonight Show* (tapes B-36 and B-56) and a CBS telecast (B-36) with Ella Fitzgerald on CBS on March 7, 1965. Other television performances in the collection include Ellington's appearance on the Keefe Braselle show with dancers Noelle Adam and Swen Swenson on or around July 31, 1963 (B-56), the Barbara McNair Show on November 2, 1966 (B-36b), and a special presentation on New York City's Channel 2 (WCBS-TV) of Duke Ellington's Sacred Concert (B-36a and M-10a). The program is preceded by an interview on the program *The Way to Go* with the Rev. Dr. Bryant Kirkland of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church (Saxon, 2000), where the concert was performed. While the telecast is of obvious musical significance, the interview with Kirkland exposes persistent societal prejudices about jazz and jazz-related music in the 1960's. Even with a distinguished artist such as Ellington, the interviewer quizzes Kirkland on everything that could conceivably go wrong and various objections to Ellington's performance in his church. The interview preceding the program thus greatly alters the context of the performance, restoring to the present day a sense of what a controversial undertaking it was at the time.

Although Baker’s collection is primarily concerned with Duke Ellington, other major artists are also present. Some recordings feature unissued material, while others lend context to material that has been released, as with the 1940 Fargo recordings described above. Performances from artists other than Ellington which appear to be unissued include those from Harry James from a split broadcast with Ellington on WEAF (tape “Jerry VCI”) on May 1, 1943 (Garrod and Johnston, 1985, p. 31) an interview with Count Basie in Sweden (likely August 9, 1962 due to the mention of opening night at the Grona Lund), separate performances by Count Basie (B-63) and George Shearing (M-54) not located in discographical entries, and what appears to be a master recording of a Louis Armstrong concert apocryphally known as the “Cornell Concert” (also on tape “Jerry VCI”).

Ricky Riccardi, the Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House Museum, clarified that both the location and date of the “Cornell Concert” are incorrect, because the musicians on the concert only performed together between August and November of 1953, not on the often-cited date of February 25, 1954, and not at Cornell University (R. Riccardi, 2018, personal communication, May 8). Indeed, the exact date and location remain unknown (The Jazz Discography, 2020). But the importance of Rhodes S. Baker, Jr.’s recording is that it provides insights into the original performance order, as the master tape order differs from that of various commercial releases and efforts by discographer Jos Willems to reconstruct the performance order (Willems, 2006, p. 234). Figure 2 provides the order present on the tape. The tape likely proceeds in chronological order, but the figure notes places where the recording stops and restarts:

Track 3, 21:17 When It’s Sleepy Time Down South
Track 3, 24:29 Armstrong; Back Home Again in Indiana
Track 3, 29:28 Armstrong; A Kiss to Build a Dream On
Track 3, 33:35 Armstrong; The Bucket’s Got a Hole in It
Track 3, 36:55 Armstrong; [audible restart in tape] Tin Roof Blues
Track 3, 42:08 Armstrong; Muskrat Ramble
Track 3, 48:05 Armstrong; Barney Bigard; High Society
Track 3, 51:34 [audible restart in tape] Armstrong (tells joke); Limehouse Blues
Track 3, 57:50 Announcer introduces Milt Hinton; Hinton introduces These Foolish Things
Track 3, 1:02:30 Armstrong; Blueberry Hill
Track 3, 1:05:20 Armstrong introduces Trummy Young; Margie (with two reprises)
Track 3, 1:10:18 Velma Middleton, Mama’s Back in Town
Track 3, 1:13:48 Middleton; That’s My Desire, duet with Armstrong
Track 3, 1:19:01 -1:23:48 Middleton introduces drummer, “Mop-Mop”

[10 seconds of tape silence]
Track 3, 1:24:01 When It's Sleepy Time Down South
Track 3, 1:26:12 Armstrong introduction; Didn't He Ramble
[Track 3 ends, Track 4 resumes with Didn't He Ramble after dirge section]
Track 4, 0:00 - Resumes Didn't He Ramble
Track 4, 3:35 - C'est Si Bon [unissued per Tom Lord discography (The Jazz Discography, 2020)]
Track 4, 6:02 - Rockin' Chair
Track 4, 10:45 - Way Down Yonder in New Orleans
Track 4, 16:16 - Armstrong introduction; C Jam Blues
Track 4, 21:30 - St. Louis Blues
Track 4, 26:21 - Announcer, Hinton, Pick and Pat
Track 4, 29:27 - 34:19 Armstrong, Trummy Young, Basin Street Blues

Figure 2: Performance order of Louis Armstrong's "Cornell Concert" on Rhodes Baker tape "Jerry VCI".

The "Cornell Concert" master again points to the complementarity of archival recordings and commercial releases as means of access. To return to Christopher Small's concept of musicking, the not-actually-Cornell performance demonstrates that the musicking activities of one group can facilitate better musicking by another, in layers of activities that add value: The first occasion of this example of musicking was the public concert circa 1953, but someone had to record it, someone had to duplicate it, and someone had to send a copy to Rhodes S. Baker, Jr., who had to dub it onto his own densely packed "mixtape" and maintain the copy. After his death, the Music Library acquired the recording, and multiple librarians over the years shepherded its preservation and eventual digitization, after which intensive listening finally confirmed the contents. The substantiated contents of the tape revealed findings that enhance the understanding and enjoyment of this concert, and provided a master or near-master as a point of comparison for the commercial releases found primarily on disparate, small labels (The Jazz Discography, 2020). Finally, it is incidental sounds – evidence of a tape stopping and starting – which testify to unanswered questions: What was skipped over, by whom, and when? Barring the emergence of another recording (one may dare to hope), those questions may remain unanswered, but questions left unanswered are distinct from questions never known to exist in the first place.

Conclusion

The process of digitizing and describing the materials in Baker's collection offers three principal lessons for similar projects: First, labor-intensive listening and research can yield exceptional returns on the investment of time and labor. Second, Christopher Small's musicking offers an enlightening framework for archival practice with recorded music, capturing the full scope of human activity and interventions that practitioners may document and describe. Not only does someone have to be the audience, as UNT Music Library volunteer Daisy Rogers noted, but they are part of the full story. Lastly, one may regard incidental and extra-musical content as enhancing the listening experience, and as a source of valuable contextual information.

The digitized reel-to-reel recordings from the Rhodes S. Baker, Jr. Collection are a monument to Duke Ellington, but they are also a monument to the dedication of his "musicking" community of fans which spanned the globe — particularly with respect to the friendship between Benny Aasland, the Swedish Ellington expert, and Baker, a Texan who was an attorney by day, and a passionate collector of Ellington on his own time. Baker's collection says as much about himself as it does about Ellington, and over 50 years after his passing, he would surely be pleased to know his love of all things Ellington lives on as part of his legacy, and that the story continues to be told.

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