A Donor Speaks! Reminiscence of a Rogue AV Nerd of Documenting Louisville, Kentucky's Early Punk Scene

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A Donor Speaks! Reminiscence of a Rogue AV Nerd of Documenting Louisville, Kentucky’s Early Punk Scene

By Heather Fox, University of Louisville, and Jeff Jobson

In 2013, the University of Louisville Archives and Special Collections (ASC) launched the Louisville Underground Music Archive (LUMA) Project. The mission of the initiative is to document the history and culture of the Louisville rock music scene from the 1970s to the present. Archives and Special Collections’ goal is to address the gap in the historical record related to independent/underground rock music culture in Louisville. Since the launch of LUMA, ASC has received over 40 collections from fans, musicians, record store labels, and local publications. Materials include fliers, zines, original art, fan mail, correspondence, t-shirts and posters, and a variety of audiovisual materials including videos of shows, published recordings, master tapes, and photographs. This article will highlight two particularly interesting collections of audiovisual materials received by the ASC team so far, one donated by a former employee of the University of Louisville and one being created by ASC via the Louisville Underground Oral Histories project.

The Jeff Jobson Collection

The Jeff Jobson Collection comprises the largest donation of video recordings received thus far at 23.5 linear feet. Jobson worked for the University of Louisville in the audiovisual lab when he started recording punk shows. I asked Jobson to describe documenting the scene and the various equipment he used.

“Back when I was recording bands in the late 1970s, the typical equipment available was almost comically large. The format was usually ½-inch EIAJ open reel videotape. I had occasion to shoot with Sony’s Porta-Pak a couple of times, but preferred not to. As a ‘portable’ machine, it was fragile, temperamental, and prone to quit working at inopportune moments. The black-and-white camera was ungainly to hold, and the recorder itself hung from a strap that dug into your shoulder. It carried a fat battery bigger than the span of your hand that, when fully charged, ALMOST lasted as long as the 30 minute reel of videotape.

“After a couple of semisuccessful recording adventures, I decided it was better to trust AC power. The bigger table top decks could hold a 60-minute reel, and the tripod mounted camera was easier to manipulate. Still, it was a chore lugging them around. The recorders weighed over 50 pounds, and the cameras came packed in a bulky suitcase. I have fond memories of pulling myself up the wooden ladder to the loft in Robert Nedelkoff’s barn one handed, while hoisting the recorder behind me with the other. Then repeating the process with the camera case. The microphone of choice (not that there was any OTHER choice available) was the Electro-Voice 635a mounted on a table stand. It was known in the news industry as ‘The Hammer,’ because if you felt like it you could use one to pound nails. And yet, for as rugged as it was, the microphone gathered pretty decent sound. Those early recordings did a good job of capturing the sound of loud, sloppy punk music.

“Later, I was able to utilize ¾-inch Umatic decks. Still putting my trust in AC power (and the fact that portable decks were too expensive to allow a young reprobate to wield), these machines weigh close to 100 pounds! They were a cassette format, but the cassettes were bigger than my shoe and still held only up to 60 minutes of tape. But the tape was better protected, and you didn’t have to thread it across the heads. And, presumably, the format made a sharper and more stable image. On one occasion, I had access to a rudimentary camera switcher for a festival of sorts in Hassold Auditorium. I rounded up some volunteers

Jeff Jobson, 1980. Screen grab from ½-inch open reel video

(Continued on page 24)
from my friends and set up three cameras to switch. One
was set up on the catwalk over the stage, which involved
me dragging the suitcase one handed again up a very tiny
ladder. I had a nonacrophobic friend stationed there, and
two other friends on cameras at other points on the floor.
I sat in the middle of the auditorium with the Umatic
deck and the switcher. For sound, another friend of mine
had just acquired a binaural recording headset, which he
stuck on a mannequin head screwed into a tripod. The
result was pretty spectacular, even if the cameras were
of varied ages and not at all balanced. It worked for the
shenanigans that took place on stage.

“Even later, I began using proper portable equipment in
Sony’s Beta format. If there is one constant in the recording
world, it is that Sony will abandon any format it develops.
Every videotape I recorded in the late 70s/early 80s is on
a format Sony no longer supports. The particular Beta
format I began using was being abandoned WHILE I
was using it! This was the Beta 1 SLO-340 recorder, a
good, solid, reliable recorder with a COLOR camera.
When Sony started the Beta format, the first decks ran at
a faster speed than later ones. So they, once again, could
only record 60 minutes at a time. JVC, and consumers in
general, saw this as unacceptable. By re-engineering the
mechanics to get around Sony’s patent, and expanding the
cassette size to hold two hours of tape, VHS was born.
But I digress. I had access to the Beta 1 machine, and the
difference was amazing. I had a recorder than wasn’t too
much of a burden to set up, and the resultant recording
was in color! The camera viewfinder was still black and
white, so I had to wait until later to see what it actually
looked like. Still, a big improvement. And I was starting
to record events where I could receive a board feed for
sound, so if the engineer was any good, the sound was
mixed and not ambient.

“So, kids, that’s how it was done back in the Olden Days.
The thought that you could capture an event with a device
that lived in your pocket was science fiction. Even today,
I think I’d prefer plugging an Electro-Voice 635a into my
phone to get the sound. That’s still something that needs
improvement!”

Thankfully, Jobson held onto these recordings and
donated them to the LUMA Project. After receiving his
collection in 2014, we had a student create an item-level
inventory in an Access database as a first step in gaining
control over the vast collection. Following common
practice, she transcribed information from the tapes and
recorded the format. Jobson moved back to Louisville from
Seattle in 2015 and has been volunteering twice a week
to enhance the item-level description and help assess and
prioritize items for reformatting. As part of this process,
he was able to identify 10 linear feet of recordings we
could deaccession since they did not fall within the scope
of LUMA. Many of these were published cassette tapes
that Jobson had used in his performance art band, Stutter.
The remaining videos document the earliest days of the
punk scene in Louisville. Performances by the Endtables,
the Blinders, and the Babylon Dance Band capture the
beginnings of what would flourish into the well-known
music scene that exists today.
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