

Amateur Archivists: Tape Trading, Bootlegs, and the Archive

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Abstract

This paper throws the negative connotations of the word ‘bootleg’ into question through analyzing the cultures and works implied in the term. Starting with the career of Alan Lomax, the paper weaves the history of alternative live recording techniques and illicitly released studio recordings into a tapestry that depicts these communities as an unconventional archival force. Particular focus is given to the creative implementation of copyright violation through describing the curatorial techniques and preservation methods of Harry Smith’s *The Anthology of American Folk Music* and the oeuvre of Robert Earl Davis, Jr., better known as DJ Screw. The paper contrasts those narratives with the failures of copyright holders to preserve their materials. With listeners trending towards committing monthly payments for licenses to access limited music libraries instead of personal ownership of physical materials, the narrative of these ‘amateur archivists,’ who turned ownership into an art and archival form, deserves re-evaluation.

Introduction

As an umbrella term, the word ‘bootleg’ has never been able to transcend its criminal connotations. For many, the word triggers memories of virus-ridden files from Limewire, poorly packaged physical releases, and tinny sound quality. When people use the term ‘bootleg’ in the broadest sense, these assumptions are somewhat fair. Sound recordings have been copyright-protected on the federal level since February 1972.¹ Yet it would take, at most, 15 minutes in a flea market, online bidding site, or record store to find at least one ill-made ‘commercial’ release from a for-profit bootleg label. However, the concept of ‘copyright-violating sound recordings’

¹ Besek, *Copyright and Related Issues Relevant to Digital Preservation and Dissemination of Unpublished Pre-1972 Sound Recordings by Libraries and Archives*, vi.

that the word ‘bootleg’ encapsulates also includes ‘tape traders,’ a not-for-profit sub-subculture of fans that operate a virtual community archive of live shows, oftentimes recorded by members of that community, and of unreleased or neglected recordings.

While most writing on ‘tape traders’ associates the term with “jam bands” like the Grateful Dead and Phish,² the practices and ethos that underline the concept of ‘tape trading’ stretch across decades and genres. Before fans started dedicating their lives to recording and preserving as many Dead shows as possible, Alan Lomax, ethnomusicologist for the Library of Congress’ American Folk Life Center, traveled through the American south to record and archive live performances from local folk singers.³ On the opposite end of the ‘live and studio recordings’ spectrum, filmmaker Harry Smith transferred and curated selections from his personal 78 rpm shellac disc collection to produce *The Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952.⁴ Ahead of his time by fifty years, Smith’s work anticipated creative works employing copyrighted material that relied on ‘tape trader’ and file sharing networks for distribution like the work of Houston-based DJ Screw⁵ and numerous other hip-hop remixers and disc jockeys.

The ‘tape trading’ and sharing networks that emerged around these ‘jam band’ acts and cult figures like DJ Screw would be so entwined to their respective genre’s cultural identity that bands like The Grateful Dead would designate specific crowd sections for the ‘tapers.’⁶ Before

² Marshall, “For and against the Record Industry: An Introduction to Bootleg Collectors and Tape Traders,” 58.

³ Groce, “Link to the Library of Congress: Alan Lomax—Folk Songs, Song Collectors, and Recording Technology,” 59.

⁴ Moist, “Collecting, Collage, and Alchemy: The Harry Smtih Anthology of American Folk Music as Art and Cultural Intervention,” 113.

⁵ Hall, “The Slow Life and Fast Death of DJ Screw.”

⁶ Whitman, “When We’re Finished with It, They Can Have It,” 1.

home internet, ‘tape traders’ would primarily exchange material through the postal service.⁷

Once the internet became a household mainstay, ‘tape trading’ communities moved from physical media to digital. Filesharing networks like etree.org, What.CD, and the Internet Archive’s Live Music Archive used quality control and metadata creation methods to ensure that the adherence to quality reflected the ideals set up during the era of physical media.

There are two distinct types of these ‘tape traded’ live music recordings, the ‘audience’ tape and the ‘soundboard’ tape. The ‘taper’ creates the ‘audience’ tape through recording a live performance with hidden “high-end microphones” plugged into a “portable recorder.” In contrast, the ‘taper’ creates the soundboard tape through connecting the recording device to the sound engineer’s mixing board, creating a far higher quality recording than an ‘audience’ tape.⁸ Both genres encapsulate the majority of live recordings that proliferate ‘tape trader’ communities. For this paper, I will use the term ‘tape trading’ to refer to the not-for-profit practice of producing and trading illicit sound recordings and ‘bootleg’ to refer to for-profit illicit audio releases. However, it is challenging to make a hard distinction between the two, bootleg labels use similar methodologies to ‘tape traders’ to record live concerts and the studio recordings that ‘tape traders’ freely trade could trace their origins to bootleg commercial releases. Overall, in creating methodologies and quality standards for material shared within these fan networks, I argue that ‘tape traders’ function as a form of virtual community archiving.

The Society of American Archivists defines a community archive as collected records relating to a group’s “share[d] common interests, and social, cultural, and historical heritage.”⁹

⁷ Neumann and Simpson, “Smuggled Sound: Bootleg Recording and the Pursuit of Popular Memory,” 320.

⁸ Berg, “On the Removal of Download Access to Grateful Dead Soundboards from the Live Music Archive,” 176.

⁹ “Community Archives.”

With that definition in mind, ‘tape trader’ communities, as epitomized particularly through the fan cultures around “jam band” acts and the artistic outputs of hip-hops artists, function as a sort of ‘virtual community archive,’ presenting an alternative to current modes of artistic creation and preservation unconcerned with the particularities of copyright regulations. The idealized environments of underground open access created within these subcultures blurs the line between accessibility and exploitation of copyrighted music, an issue that can easily destroy the repositories that fans and other members of tape trading communities have maintained for years. Despite this concern, I argue in this paper that the concept of the ‘tape trader’ should expand beyond its current construction as a subset of bootlegging practices in order to be represented and respected as an innovative, if unconventional, archival force.

Recording a Live Performance

Before ‘tape trading’ communities emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the “folk song collectors” of the early twentieth century provided the technical framework from which audience-based live music recording evolved. Representing mainstream archival institutions like the Library of Congress’ American Folklife Center¹⁰ and commercial labels like Folkway Records,¹¹ “folk song collectors” recorded, published, and compiled traditional music in American communities before the advent of home recording.¹² Alan Lomax, a ‘collector’ for the American Folklife Center, began his career transcribing folk music lyrics and notation for print publication. Later, with the introduction of electronic sound recording, he adopted new audio formats as they developed, starting with a wax cylinder-based recording device before moving on to recording music directly

¹⁰ Groce, "Link to the Library of Congress: Alan Lomax—Folk Songs, Song Collectors, and Recording Technology," 29.

¹¹ Briggs, “SIDEWALKS OF N.Y.: West-Side Kids at Play Heard in Own Songs,” 274.

¹² “American Southern Folk Song Collecting.”

on to a 78 rpm shellac disc and finally recording his subjects on to magnetic tape.¹³ During and after his career, scholars and Lomax himself labeled his work as “field recordings,”¹⁴ indicating a more anthropological view of his output than a musical one. Despite having a label that seems to repel any kind of musical appreciation, Lomax functioned as both an archivist and a tastemaker, with subjects like Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly finding commercial success after Lomax had recorded and published their performances.¹⁵ However, beyond the cultural influence of Lomax’s work, his adoption and understanding of electronic sound recording technology preserved ephemeral events like live music performances.

Lomax’s legacy of embracing new technologies in his non-commercial work recording live folk music performances is better reflected in ‘tape traders’ recording live music than any commercial music publishing enterprise. To the ‘tape traders’ recording live performances, their not-for-profit ethos and adherence to producing a high-quality deliverable stand in direct contrast with the cheap, low quality of commercial bootleg releases. In a 1997 interview, an anonymous ‘taper’ expressed frustration at commercial ‘bootleg’ releases of audience-taped live performances, dismissing their recording methodologies as little more than “someone... stand[ing] with a mike in their hand for two hours” to profit off of the artist’s creative work. Differentiating themselves from the ramshackle practices of commercial bootleg labels, the taper described their own work in “the worst possible conditions,” also known as a live music audience, to create the “best possible recording.”¹⁶ Those “conditions” necessitated developing skills in avoiding extraneous noise from

¹³ Groce, "Link to the Library of Congress: Alan Lomax—Folk Songs, Song Collectors, and Recording Technology," 29.

¹⁴ Cohen, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings, 1934-1997*, 4.

¹⁵ Munnely, "Alan Lomax, 1915-2002," 116.

¹⁶ Neumann and Simpson, "Smuggled Sound: Bootleg Recording and the Pursuit of Popular Memory," 344.

other audience members, remaining invisible to concert security, and keeping the microphone in a single position throughout recording for the sake of consistent sound quality. Beyond further underscoring the difference between a ‘tape trader’ and a commercial bootleg label, this interview portrays the act of illicitly recording live performances as a learned practice that asks the taper to develop specific techniques. In using their learned skills, derived from prior work and experiences from other ‘tapers’, the ‘taper’ creates a deliverable for their fan network.

In the case of the audience tape, those skills result in a deliverable that keeps the presence of the record creator as minimal as possible, centering their value on the content rather than the producer. In the taper’s words, the actual event of the concert, “the worst possible conditions,” functions as a hinderance to the creation of a high-quality archival document, “the best possible recording.” Anything that bears the mark of a human being producing the recording, whether it’s the voice of an audience member near the microphone or a change in sound quality due to moving equipment, damages the value of the deliverable. In contrast with the ‘audience’ recording, the ‘soundboard’ recording’s origins from the sound engineer’s mixing board results in a production methodology that is focused on the content rather than the ‘taper’s’ presence. In that way, these “best possible recordings” attempt not to emulate the ‘taper’s’ individual experience attending the live performance, which would be akin to the maligned “standing... for two hours” method, as much as it tries to create an audio document for the listener to virtually partake in the event for as long as the recorded document exists.

The resistance to a human presence in the deliverable also functions as an undercurrent within the not-for-profit ideologies inherent to ‘tape trading’ communities. In a 2003 email to sociologist Lee Marshall, an anonymous tape trader describes the general motive of the community as “one” that “enjoys music and wants to spread it to others,” while in contrast bootleggers “want

to make a quick, dishonest buck.”¹⁷ A tape shared through a network of fans, connecting to each other through the postal service, underscores the notion that no single individual is responsible for the maintenance of the record’s accessibility. In contrast, the act of performing a transaction between seller and buyer inflicts a human presence that taints the record’s value the same way a microphone-adjacent audience member’s cough would. ‘Tape trading’ communities work, in both ideology and methodology, to remove the focus from the individual in a manner that bootleg labels, which gets inevitably branded by the distributing organization, simply cannot.

With an understanding of the methodologies and ideologies of ‘tape traders,’ it is unfair to evaluate them using the same standards that one would apply to commercial bootleg labels. Rather, ‘tape trader’ produced live recordings should be viewed as closer in kin to Lomax’s field recordings and evaluated as such. The field recording derives value from preserving “ambient environmental noise” in the background,¹⁸ underscoring a sense of authenticity to the listener and bolstering the claim that they are listening to an unmanipulated document of an event. In creating “the best possible recording,” the taper aims to capture the general tone of the venue, not the experience of standing in a specific location inside of it. The audience taper, even with their best effort, cannot transcend the ambient noise around the microphone. But like the field recording, the value is derived from the recorder’s absence in the final audio document, opting for the ambient sound of the environment around the performer over making the manipulation of the recording evident to the listener. Tape traders create documents that do not reflect the individual experience,

¹⁷ Marshall, "For and against the Record Industry: An Introduction to Bootleg Collectors and Tape Traders," 66.

¹⁸ Young, “Hi-Fi Heritage: Recording Technology, Audio Engineering, and the Mediation of Authenticity in the Polish Revival of Traditional Music,” 39.

rather, like Lomax, they create subject-centric historical documents that preserve an ephemeral form of performance.

Studio Recordings in Tape-Trader and Bootleg Communities

If Alan Lomax's work showcased recording techniques that formed the methodological backbone of 'tape trading' communities, Folkway Records' "dubiously legal" 1952 commercial "bootleg,"¹⁹ *The Anthology of American Folk Music* established the creative deployment of copyright-restricted unreleased or neglected recordings in 'bootleg' material. Experimental filmmaker Harry Smith curated this three-volume compilation of 'folk' and 'race' records released between 1927 and 1932²⁰ from own extensive 78 rpm shellac disc collection, debuting these songs on the then-novel 33 1/3 rpm format.²¹ Transferring the recordings from an obsolete format to a more current one allowed the songs to reach a new generation of performers. In a 2001 interview, Bob Dylan cited "that Harry Smith anthology"²² as one of the many influences on performers in the 1950s and 1960s New York City folk scene. Other performers from that era like Dave Van Ronk praised the compilation in the liner notes of its 'legitimate' 1997 release on the Smithsonian Folkways label.²³ Even if RCA Records, who owned the copyright on a fair number of the tracks contained in the *Anthology*, attempted to block further pressings,²⁴ the compilation's circulation amongst members of these musical communities allowed Smith's work to recontextualize the copyrighted songs within it.

¹⁹ Marcus, "The Old Weird America."

²⁰ Smith, "Foreword."

²¹ Moist, "Collecting, Collage, and Alchemy: The Harry Smith Anthology of American Folk Music as Art and Cultural Intervention," 113.

²² Skinner, "'Must Be Born Again': Resurrecting the 'Anthology of American Folk Music,'" 63.

²³ Skinner, 60.

²⁴ Skinner, 63.

The rebellious nature of the *Anthology* extends beyond the illicit nature of its creation into the thematic underpinnings of the work, interrogating the classification of record labels in a manner only possible through operating outside their purview. Smith curated the *Anthology* to subvert “tendenc[ies]” from labels like RCA to divide records “into blues catalogs or hillbilly catalogs,” meaning Black blues music and white folk music delineations, opting instead to divide each volume according to genre: “Ballads,” “Social Music,” and “Songs.”²⁵ In a 2006 article, digital preservationist Katherine Skinner argued that Smith’s centering the *Anthology* on the “aural similarities rather than imagined distinctions between music of people from different times, ethnicities, classes and regions” emphasizes “the cross germination of American folk tunes.”²⁶ As part of a single set, the music can be in dialogue with one another in a way that would not be possible with Lomax’s regionally-focused ‘field recordings.’ Smith’s curation in the *Anthology* is only possible because he operated outside of the restrictions of copyright. In 1952, RCA Records or Paramount or Columbia or any other major label whose holdings comprise the *Anthology*’s eighty-four tracks would not sequence “race” records intended for a Black audience side-by-side with songs from white artists. Smith’s subversion of common practice in that era created a stronger document that, as its legacy attests to, helped listeners understand the music’s context.

A recontextualization project on the scale of the *Anthology* is only possible with a large, personal collection of physical media. Outside of the reach of copyright holder, Smith’s 78 rpm collection allowed him, in his own words, to “build up a series of objects that allow some sort of generalization to be made”²⁷ out of the patterns and narrative that emerge from his own

²⁵ Skinner, 65.

²⁶ See note 25 above.

²⁷ Moist, "Collecting, Collage, and Alchemy: The Harry Smith Anthology of American Folk Music as Art and Cultural Intervention," 113-114.

organization. Smith's original liner notes for the *Anthology* are explicit about their origins as physical discs, with the notes transcribing all information on the original label and listing other songs in the performer's discography.²⁸ Unlike commercial 'bootleg' releases, appropriately maligned as cheap counterfeit productions, Smith unabashedly presents the *Anthology* as an act of copyright violation, fully citing the work that he has reproduced. But in the custodianship apparent in the liner notes, Smith also showcases a passion for these songs. The act of transference from an obsolete format to an accessible one, of creating a document that placed each one of these discarded tracks in the context of a greater culture, all indicate a notion of care to the material on Smith's part that the copyright holders of these songs, who had let them fall out of print once the Great Depression made the 'folk music' business unprofitable,²⁹ could not match.

Music label's custodianship skills have not particularly improved in the decades since the *Anthology*. 'Tapes' for trade and commercial bootlegs featuring unreleased music from Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, and others could have their origins traced back to CBS Records abandoning reams of original master tapes after selling off a Nashville warehouse.³⁰ More tragically, decades later, Universal Music Group lost a yet-to-be-calculated number of master tapes in a 2008 fire. In the aftermath, Universal attempted to cover up the incident through lying about the survival of master tapes to artists that had lost material in the fire.³¹ In light of incidences of neglect like these, why should any reasonable artist or fan trust these labels to be decent custodians of their holdings? For these copyright holders, the value of their recordings derives from their performance in the marketplace, for the 'tape trader' and collector, the value derives from the

²⁸ Smith, "Foreword."

²⁹ See note 28 above.

³⁰ Marshall, "For and against the Record Industry: An Introduction to Bootleg Collectors and Tape Traders," 59.

³¹ Rosen, "The Day the Music Burned."

recording's continued existence. Whether through learned techniques, as in the case of these live show tapers, or through the meticulous collecting of records and their presentation, as reflected in Smith's *Anthology* liner notes, these 'tape traders' and other assorted amateur preservationists have been maintaining the cultural heritage of mass produced recordings in spite of the music label's neglect. The continued 'survival' of these neglected materials in the cultural memory and maybe even their existence is dependent upon the recontextualization that individuals like Smith can provide.

Tape Trading and Bootlegs Go Online

The notion of 'survival' changed for 'tape traders' and collectors after the emergence of home internet at the end of the twentieth century. With a whole new influx of community members trading music files over the Internet, these communities had to create new regulations to maintain a consistent quality. For networks like the open access etree.org, it means requiring all uploaders post music files in the high-quality Free Lossless Audio Codec (FLAC) format and contain metadata related to the technical quality and recording origins in the description.³² Also requiring uploads in the FLAC format, the exclusive file-sharing network What.CD, now shuttered, maintained quality by requiring users to have either received an invitation from a member in good standing or to have passed a quiz on digital audio transfers and preservation to access its repository.³³ Live Music Archive's, a subset of the Internet Archive, Grateful Dead section only allows three people to upload shows to their repository.³⁴ These regulations allow these virtual

³² "Getting Started".

³³ "What.CD Interview Preparation".

³⁴ Berg, "On the Removal of Download Access to Grateful Dead Soundboards from the Live Music Archive," 179.

community archives to remain viable, so that their holdings do not become slapped-together recordings of someone “stand[ing]... with a mike in their hand for two hours.”

While quality standards have stayed consistent throughout these file-sharing platforms, the sites vary in their policies regarding what content users can share on the platform. Etree.org maintains a list of “trade-friendly bands,” hosted on the Internet Archive, requiring users to only share music from listed acts on the platform.³⁵ Within that list, they also demand users do not share ‘legitimately’ released performances.³⁶ In contrast, What.CD allowed anything and everything on the platform, whether it was commercial studio releases, ‘tape trader’-produced live performances, or commercial bootleg releases.³⁷ The obvious illegality of What.CD’s content policy, which led to French authorities shutting down the site in 2016,³⁸ also allowed it to be an expansive repository of recorded music.³⁹ What.CD’s policy translates collectors ideals, which people like Smith epitomized, to the internet’s potential for infinite reproduction. Once concerns are no longer material, outside of, say, hard drive space, tape trading communities can shift in focus to amassing the sheer volume of content, at the highest possible quality, for personal consumption.

However, copyright holders can still threaten the survival of these file-sharing networks, even ones whose users perceive as doing everything right in terms of copyright concerns. On November 22, 2005, the Grateful Dead effectively shuttered the Live Music Archive’s collection of the band’s live recordings, leaving the audience recordings only accessible to stream and the metadata for soundboard recordings available.⁴⁰ After a few days of outrage from fans, the band

³⁵ “About Etree.org.”

³⁶ “Trade Friendly.”

³⁷ Sonnad, “The Greatest Music Collection in the World Just Vanished.”

³⁸ See note 37.

³⁹ Ward, “Remembering What.CD, the Internet’s Greatest Music Archive.”

⁴⁰ Berg, “On the Removal of Download Access to Grateful Dead Soundboards from the Live Music Archive,” 176.

compromised their hardline requests. Since November 2005, users have been allowed to download and stream audience recordings and exclusively stream soundboard recordings.⁴¹ The Grateful Dead's actions towards the Live Music Archive's extensive collection and the shuttering of What.CD underscore the fact that these repositories, not in spite of but because of the maintenance and care their users put in to them, are in a precarious situation. To contrast this with the physical media era, RCA could shut down further pressings of *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, but it would be impossible to hound after and shut down each individual seller of the record. Digital file sharing allows increased surveillance and greater ease to shutter file-sharing communities.

Creative Copyright Infringement: DJ Screw's Archival Practice

However, these digital file-sharing networks are one of the few ways to actually distribute copyright-violating creative works, a descriptor that includes a fair amount of hip-hop produced for distribution in independent or underground networks in the 1980s and 1990s. The story of DJ Screw, a Houston-based disk jockey whose self-distributed work almost solely consisted of unauthorized copyrighted materials, thematically merges the curatorial significance of Smith's work with the openness and sharing ethos of those audience-set live music tapers. Born Robert Earl Davis, Jr., DJ Screw pioneered the "chopped and screwed" style of remixing songs, 'chopping' the recording in a vinyl disc-to-tape transfer to allow for repetition of musical phrases and 'screwing' the tape heads to dub his mixes at a much slower speed to evoke a hazed tone.⁴² His oeuvre, which spans over 350 copyright-violating mixtapes and 6 'legitimate' releases,⁴³ could only exist, like the *Anthology*, with flagrant disregard to copyright law. The R&B and hip-hop hits of the day functioned as the canvas for Davis' work in the same way the

⁴¹ Berg, 180.

⁴² Clemens, "Archives and Finding Aids: DJ Screw Papers."

⁴³ "DJ Screw Double Disc CDs."

folk music of the early twentieth century inspired Smith, with him reinventing tracks from artists like UGK, Janet Jackson, 2Pac, and Teddy Pendergrass through his own creative and technical prism. Like Smith, his creative work was also archival, but instead of transferring and preserving neglected material, Davis preserved trends and popular music within the Houston hip-hop scene.

Davis' work, along with being a creative exercise, also functioned as a regionally focused archival practice. While creating soundboard recordings of his remixes, Davis would invite Houston-based rappers, adopting the moniker the "Screwed Up Clique," to record freestyle raps over his music.⁴⁴ Alongside preserving trends and his own creative work on his tapes, Davis' collaboration with other Houston-based hip-hop artists function as a Lomax-esque preservation of live performance. With a narrower scope than the broad geographies and temporalities of Smith's work and being a part of the community producing the work, unlike Lomax's archival tourism, Davis' work, produced over thirteen years, reflects changing trends and preserves performers within a specific region throughout that period. Davis' do-it-yourself methods also put him at a relatively unique position from an archival standpoint. As the artist and distributor of DJ Screw tapes, he was simultaneously the subject and creator of his own archival record.

However, ironically enough, Davis' adherence to self-distribution later prompted a bootleg market to emerge around his work, allowing fake and poorly duplicated DJ Screw tapes to proliferate.⁴⁵ Once Davis gained a small reputation for his disc jockeying after producing a handful of tapes for friends and family, he started selling his DJ Screw cassettes in the backyard of his Houston home. Once that proved untenable due to his ballooning popularity, Davis opened "Screwed Up Records and Tapes" in Houston, selling only his own material from the store's

⁴⁴ Fickman, "Keeping DJ Screw's Memory Alive."

⁴⁵ Hall, "The Slow Life and Fast Death of DJ Screw."

window.⁴⁶ The limited opportunities for fans to acquire a DJ Screw cassette prompted a bootleg market to emerge around his work. Like the hated “mike holders” for tape traders, various bootleg music distributors in Texas would duplicate DJ Screw tapes to sell them for a premium price.⁴⁷ The direct connection between the record creator and the listener, a central tenant in Davis’ self-distributed work and other ‘bootleg’ objects like the ‘taper’s’ live recording, becomes severed from a ‘middle man’ poorly transferring or even mimicking Davis’ work.

Frustrated with the limited quantity of Davis’ physical releases, fans resorted to digitizing his tapes and distributing them on file-sharing platform like Napster,⁴⁸ allowing the reach of his work to expand beyond south Texas. Davis’ oeuvre is far too expensive in terms of rights and clearances to make an ‘official’ release possible, so copyright-violating file-sharing networks became the primary hub of distribution for his work.⁴⁹ Currently, researchers can access and download every DJ Screw mixtape that Screwed Up Records has published on compact disc through the Internet Archive, with metadata covering the names of the tracks played on each tape, the year of release, and title.⁵⁰ While the metadata is lacking compared to more publicized file-sharing communities like Grateful Dead fans, the lack of accreditation given to the members of the “Screwed Up Clique” on the tapes is a particularly disappointing oversight, the virtual archive Robert Earl Davis, Jr.’s work allows his art, which has no hope of receiving any type of standard distribution, the opportunity to reach audiences.

However, true to his work in physical materials, Davis’ archival presence is not limited to the digital sphere. The University of Houston’s Special Collections holds the DJ Screw Papers

⁴⁶ Hall.

⁴⁷ Hall.

⁴⁸ Serwer, “DJ Screw: From Cough Syrup to Full Blown Fever.”

⁴⁹ Hall.

⁵⁰ “DJ screw – Chapter 214. Old School (1994).”

collection, which includes Davis' record collection, related memorabilia, and the original "screw tapes."⁵¹ Discussing the collection in a 2016 interview, archivist Julie Grob acknowledges that she "felt" when she first heard of DJ Screw as a musical innovator "that if [Davis was] in any other field... we'd be out there trying to collect it."⁵² Despite that quote reflecting Davis' reputation as a canonized artist, the tapes and materials' value derive not only from their quality as art but also as historical documents depicting Houston's history. For researchers focused particularly on Davis' creative work, the most valuable aspect of the collection is the original "screw tapes." Available in endless copies through digital file-sharing platforms, the notion of an 'original' DJ Screw tape, and the value implied therein, contradicts the duplication and manipulation at the core of his art. Still, the DJ Screw Papers is the most popular collection at The University of Houston,⁵³ its popularity amongst community members a reflection of the idea that his work depicted not only his own artistic vision, but the imagination of an entire city. In their creation, distribution, and preservation, the work of Robert Earl Davis, Jr. underscores all the ideals of underground music cultures operating outside of the realm of copyright.

Conclusion

However, the utopian ideal of internet music distribution as a platform of continued survival and infinite access has not come to pass. Considering the rapid normalization of streaming services that allow the listener to never 'own' the music they love, the story of bootleggers and 'tape traders' as archival forces feel more relevant than ever. Services like Spotify are inherently limiting in their catalogue as it is impossible to get a license on everything,

⁵¹ Clemens, "Archives and Finding Aids: DJ Screw Papers."

⁵² Bennett, Charlie, Fred Rascoe, Wendy Hagenmaier, Ameet Doshi, and Julie Grob, "Music Archives IV: DJ Screw. Other. Lost in the Stacks on WREK Radio."

⁵³ Fickman, "Keeping DJ Screw's Memory Alive."

try finding *The Anthology of American Folk Music* or any of DJ Screw's mixtapes outside a handful of his 'legitimate' releases on a streaming service. The Internet Archive, which holds all those items and more, is currently under threat from lawsuits related to its book lending service.⁵⁴ With digital networks in a consistently precarious position, the actual physicality of these sound recordings should not go unnoticed and forgotten.

The actual copyright owners can do a decent job forgetting on their own. Incidents like the Universal fire shine a light on an industry unprepared, whether through a lack of imagination or indifference, to handle the continued survival of material. The false dichotomy of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' material, enforced by industry bodies like the Record Industry Association of America, serve only to further obscure the preservation work fans have done when copyright holders have failed to properly preserve or make accessible their material. The underground network of 'tape trades,' which later found itself replicated in file-sharing networks, showcases an ethical, methodological, and ideological commitment that transcends the 'bootleg' umbrella it is so frequently cast under.

⁵⁴ Bustillos, "Publishers are Taking the Internet to Court."

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