

Johan Kugelberg: *A Stranger Building Bridges for Collections*

Building contemporary collections is rewarding, SPENCER W. STUART discovers, but also requires patience.

IN 1908, GEORG SIMMEL introduced a concept to the language of sociology, ‘The Stranger.’ For Simmel, the category differed from ‘The Outsider’ and ‘The Wanderer,’ the former being a person with no relation to a group and the latter a transient character who “comes today and leaves tomorrow.”¹ Instead, The Stranger, as Simmel put it, “comes today and stays tomorrow,” remaining outside a group while participating with it. It is this maintained distance, Simmel argued, that allows The Stranger to assume a unique position not easily occupied by native group members.

Heading south on the R train to Canal Street thinking through the 120-plus archives Johan Kugelberg and his outfit, Boo-Hooray, have placed since roughly 2010, it is clear Kugelberg’s success lies in his ability to be both enthusiastic and dogged about the preservation of post-World War II countercultures while remaining systematic and methodical in the process of stabilising and placing said material into appropriate institutional settings. Through this amalgam of passion and process, Kugelberg, like Simmel’s Stranger, has triangulated a unique position between influential countercultural figures and academia. The result: a broad and emblematic list of people he has worked with, from rap pioneer Fab 5 Freddy (whose archive he helped place at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) to The

Living Theatre founder Judith Malina (whose primary materials archive was placed in Yale’s Beinecke Library), speaks to the implicit trust such groups cautious of Outsiders have toward his methods. Ones that ensure their legacies will be thoroughly accounted for as they transition into institutions for future generations to interpret.

Kugelberg’s past life is well documented.



Kugelberg with Lupita. (All photos by Dr. Lila Wolfe, except where indicated.)

Throughout the 1990s he was involved in the music industry, serving as general manager of Matador Records and as a marketing and Artists and Repertoire executive for Def American Recordings (now American Recordings). During this period, he had the opportunity to assemble jazz anthologies for such free jazz luminaries as saxophonist Ornette Coleman and long-time collaborator, trumpeter, Don Cherry, often accompanied by comprehensive booklets to contextualise the artist’s career. These anthologies were arguably the precursor to the more extensive archival projects he undertakes today.

It was also his time in this industry that exposed Kugelberg to what he refers to as the “gnawing teeth of Time” that devour all things: lost material of Nigerian composer, musician and political activist Fela Kuti, master tapes of blues legends dumped into the Chicago River, and lost John Coltrane recording—all demises so tragic they can only be met with disbelieving silence.



*In the basement of Maggs Bros.,
Berkeley Square, London.*

Projecting myself onto the blue dot of my phone's map, wading through the sweltering heat of a late summer afternoon in Lower Manhattan, I arrive at a discreet doorway nestled between two storefronts, a parting of the polyphony of images. Ascending the stairs to Boo-Hooray's offices in Chinatown brings you to a place where, for a moment, time seems to be suspended. A space with white walls and a recently hung exhibition of the late Alan Vega, one half of the dynamic proto-electronic/industrial band Suicide. It is clear that, in this iteration of Kugelberg's life, he's taking a stand.²

Speaking with me from a leather chair, legs folded like a pretzel, Kugelberg clarifies his aim is not just to provide stabilised materials with detailed inventories that would be easy to plug into pre-existing collections. More important, he is trying to ensure these collections are made accessible to historians and the interested public as soon as possible. With a majority of the archives he has represented and accumulated being made accessible around three to five years after acquisition, his efforts have mostly been successful. But how did this approach come about? Kugelberg is a man of many hats: editor, writer, curator. All of which, he admits, are slightly askew.

Through one of his own collections, Kugelberg realised that positioning archives could become a viable career. Working with Michael Laird, then of Ursus Books in New York, he was able to sell his Philip K. Dick collection to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Through exposure to the process, the poor preservation trajectories of jazz, blues, and African music surfaced. Kugelberg began to "dig where he stood," building a collection of early New York hip-hop.³

Following this intense period of accumulation and correspondence with influential figures from the scene, Kugelberg earned their trust in his fidelity to representing the material in a comprehensive manner. It was at this point that Kugelberg began approaching institutions. To his surprise, such material was not of interest to local institutions at that period. However, a welcome home was found in Cornell University under the facilitation of special collections curator Katherine Reagan.⁴ Although this was the first of many archives he would place, the relationship forged with Cornell through conference with Reagan, the speed with which the material was made accessible, and the 2008 "Born in the Bronx: A Conference Celebrating Hip-Hop at Cornell," has become the model for Boo-Hooray's archival services. Kugelberg comes by this process honestly, adopting strategies of the music industry and applying them to collections as an agent representing a collection. For him (and Boo-Hooray) the act of placing the collection is all about visibility and lasting impressions, as observed in their numerous publications and exhibitions using material from a collection to generate interest.

With his profile online not quite fitting that of a dealer, it makes one wonder about the origins of his methods and their precursors. Kugelberg is quick to cite a long tradition between enthusiastic collectors and forward-looking librarians. Kugelberg takes the perspective of libraries and special collections as bastions and safeguards of learning, along the lines of the Jesuits who believed that the more a society kept by way of records, the better chance of a society's stability in the future.

Indeed, in speaking with Kugelberg, he consistently invokes an expansive model of

history, not dissimilar to that of Edward Gibbon, whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89) Kugelberg drops into casual conversation and interviews. Kugelberg comments on Gibbon’s ability to go on for hundreds of pages of explication and then provide a morsel that succinctly sums up a major shift within the glacial movement of time. It is to these shifts that Kugelberg (in his own Indiana Jones-like way) would like to contribute, bringing cultural movements who have had paradigmatic influences on culture to the fore while preserving their initial creators’ intent. This mission is vital because more often than not these movements’ modest, underground origins are often eclipsed by commercialisation and co-opted for marketing campaigns emulated without due credit.

At times, Kugelberg falls victim to impatience when vital primary source material is not being requested for interpretation by historians once it’s in an institution. He recalls calling Richard Ovenden, the senior executive to the Bodleian Libraries, months after donating a manuscript collection of influential UK musician and songwriter Ian Dury. On asking whether anyone had requested the material, Ovenden reminded Kugelberg that he is surrounded by historians who are still trying to assess lasting historical significance of the Beatles. Kugelberg sees this



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With Afrika Baambaataa. (Joe Conzo photo)

scenario as both unbelievable and, at the same time, delightful and heart-warming that such cultural spaces outside of current breakneck media cycles endure, where deep understanding and observation are encouraged. This is also why he strives to provide such institutions with as much diverse material as possible, illuminating perspectives from people who have the least amount of strength of voice within a society. This advocacy approach is why he does not lament when other dealers handle similar collections. Since materials related to marginalised communities so often fall



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With Jonas Mekas at the Boo-Hooray exhibit of his photography.



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Kugelberg (far right) speaks at the 8-Ball Community exhibition “A History of Zines” at MOMA/PS1 on Long Island.

through the cracks, Kugelberg always considers it a victory when it can be located, identified, and made a part of the collective memory.

Looking at his watch, with sirens passing by below, we rise from our chairs. He has a meeting with the non-profit 8-Ball Community, the grassroots zine collective of which he is a board member. “There’s so much left to be done,” he says.

Closing up, we make our way down the stairs into the New York evening. Thankfully, he is not alone in these efforts to chronicle the margins of cultural production. This can be observed in the stance of the Brooklyn Antiquarian Book Fair, the faculty of the Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminar, and course work offered by the Rare Book School (such as the upcoming course “Understanding and Identifying 20th Century Duplicating Technologies” taught by Type Punch Matrix’s Brian Cassidy). Spurred on simultaneously by institutions actively reassessing their position as cultural arbiters and a new generation of private collectors, there is an increasing movement within the trade toward ephemera and assemblages of formats that, together, come to define a cultural movement, thus calling for

a new language of cataloguing and interfacing between special collections and communities.

1. Georg Simmel. “The Stranger.” *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, 143–50.
2. Boo-Hooray runs a rigorous exhibition schedule and visitors of the space on the third floor at 277 Grand Street are likely to find a new exhibition almost monthly.
3. Kugelberg likes to mention that during this period of dedicated buying, individuals involved in the scene began to refer to him as the ATM because he would pay up front for ephemera and mixtapes related to the history.
4. Institutional positions toward hip-hop as a culturally influential art form have transitioned over the last decade with universities such as University of Houston, Harvard University and Indiana University, holding multi-donor collections.

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 ~ Spencer W. Stuart is vice-chair of the Alcuin Society, drummer, and collections management specialist based in Vancouver, BC.