



The New York Public Library
Music Division

Guide to the

Arthur Russell papers

1960-2005 [bulk 1974-1991]

JPB 16-14

Compiled by Robyn Hjermsstad, 2016.

Summary

Creator: Russell, Arthur

Title: Arthur Russell papers

Date: 1960-2005 [bulk 1974-1991]

Size: 9.3 linear feet (23 boxes, 1 oversized folder, 1 tube)

Source: Acquired from Tom Lee, 2015.

Abstract: Arthur Russell (1951-1992) was a multi-genre singer-songwriter, cellist, and record producer. The collection dates from 1960 to 2005 (bulk 1974-1991) and documents Russell's creative process, output, and reception through written and recorded music, correspondence, photographs, printed matter, articles, contracts, and biographical materials.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult:
<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Audiovisual recordings are unavailable pending digitization.

Conditions Governing Use: For permission to publish, contact the Chief, Music Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

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Processing note: Compiled by Robyn Hjermsstad, 2016. When present, original folder titles were maintained.

Creator History

Arthur Russell (1951-1992) was a multi-genre singer-songwriter, musician, and producer associated with the avant-garde music scene in New York City throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His instrument of choice was the cello, which he began playing as a child in Oskaloosa, Iowa. His music has been described as new wave, folk, disco, and experimental.

Russell left home in 1967 before completing high school to study North Indian classical music in San Francisco, California at the Ali Akbar Khan School of Music. It was in San Francisco that Russell first met and began collaborating with Allen Ginsberg. In 1973, Russell and Ginsberg united once more after Russell relocated to New York City's East Village after being accepted into the Manhattan School of Music (MSM). Ginsberg's later work, *First Blues: Rags, Ballads & Harmonium Songs 1971-1974*, contains music transcribed by Russell. Russell only briefly studied at MSM, eventually transferring to Dartmouth College. Though he discontinued his studies shortly thereafter, it was during this time that Russell met musicians Christian Wolff and Rhys Chatham, whom Russell succeeded as director of the avant-garde performance space, The Kitchen, in 1974. Russell's directorship, which lasted just over one year, was marked by his promotion of lesser-known, minimalist bands, such as The Modern Lovers and Talking Heads.

Russell's performances were primarily solo concerts. He carried out several shows at the Kitchen and Experimental Intermedia Foundation; as well as Sobossek's Bar, Jolly Munk, Dock's, Roulette, the Mudd Club, and night clubs and bars. Throughout his career, Russell collaborated with many musicians on minimalist instrumental, pop, and experimental disco projects. From 1975 to 1979, he performed with the Flying Hearts, a band consisting of him and several rotating musicians, including Ernie Brooks, Larry Saltzman, Joyce Bowden, Jesse Chamberlain, David Van Tieghem, Jerry Harrison, David Byrne, Jon Gibson, and Peter Zummo. In 1977, Russell recorded "Ballad of the Lights" with Allen Ginsberg as part of the Flying Hearts. The band Dinosaur L. (or Dinosaur) consisted of Russell, Byrne, Zummo, Henry Flynt, Wilbur Bascomb, and Alan Schwartzberg. Their 1977 hit "Kiss Me Again" (composed and produced by Russell) was one of Sire Records' earliest disco releases. Several of these individuals worked with Russell on *Instrumentals*, a lengthy orchestral work created in the mid-1970s that was released as an album in 1984. In 1980, Russell, DJ Steve A'Quisto, and Steven Hall formed the band Loose Joints. Singles included "Pop Your Funk" and "Is It All Over My Face." The Necessaries was yet another collaborative effort between Russell, Zummo, and Chamberlain. Together they produced one album *Big Sky* (later renamed *Event Horizon*), in 1981. That same year, Russell and businessman Will Socolov founded Sleeping Bag Records. Through Sleeping Bag, Russell created and produced the album *24 --> 24*, and singles "Wax the Van," "Go Bang!" (Dinosaur L.), and "School Bell/Treehouse" (with Peter Zummo). Russell and Socolov parted ways around 1987.

In 1976, Russell played music composed for him by Philip Glass in the Mabou Mines production of Samuel Beckett's *Cascando*. Glass later introduced Russell to theatrical director and playwright Robert Wilson, who commissioned Russell to compose music for his production of *Medea*. Although Wilson abandoned Russell's compositions in favor of English composer Gavin Bryers, the music was eventually incorporated into an album, *Tower of Meaning*, in 1983 (Chatham Square). *World of Echo*, Russell's only full length, solo album, was recorded and released in 1986.

Arthur Russell died of AIDS-related complications in 1992. In 1994, Point Music released *Another Thought*, the first of several compilations released posthumously. Audika Records has released six Russell compilations since its inception by Steve Knutson in 2004, including a re-release of *Tower of Meaning* in 2016. The majority of Audika's compilations and EPs contain songs that were then previously unheard. In 2008, Matt Wolf released his documentary about Russell, *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*. The book *Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992*, was published in 2009 by Tim Lawrence.

Scope and Content Note

The Arthur Russell collection dates from 1960 to 2005 (bulk 1974-1991) and contains writings, music, photographs, correspondence, articles, flyers, and posters. The vast majority of the collection consists of over 1,000 original sound and video recordings, which are unavailable pending digitization. The recordings date from the 1970s to the 1990s and consist of test pressings, studio versions, masters, and home recordings covering Russell's entire career. The paper portion of the collection is strong in its documentation of Russell's creative output, particularly through drafts, sketches, and full scores of his music.

Music files comprise the bulk of the papers and contain written music, lyrics, poetry, and notes. Written music consists primarily of manuscripts in the form of musical sketches; chord changes; complete scores; draft and partial compositions; and musical staves and chords that Russell clipped into smaller pieces. Printed music and annotated photocopies are also present. Notes consist of interior monologues and other creative explorations relating to Russell's work, as well as snippets of ideas and song lists.

Untitled, unsorted, and (largely) undated music precedes alphabetically arranged, titled files that were created by Russell. The unsorted music consists of writings, musical drafts, and sketches for a multitude of songs; song titles, when present or identified, are noted in the container list. Researchers should note that drafts or versions of a particular work may be scattered throughout these and the titled files, which contain materials pertaining to specific projects or songs. Materials used and created by Russell while he studied music in San Francisco are filed under "binders;" these and the composition notebooks contain a substantial amount of music documenting Russell's creative development. Several drafts and chord sheets created by Russell for Robert Wilson's *Medea* are present.

In addition to the music files are articles; correspondence; photographs; printed matter; biographical files; and materials relating to various record labels, such as invoices, letters, and recording schedules for Sire Records and West End Records. Two harmonicas that belonged to Russell are also present. Files for Loose Joints contain fliers, contracts, and photographs. Incoming letters comprise the bulk of the correspondence. Primary correspondents are Russell's parents, Emily and Chuck Russell; and friends Muriel Fuji, Yuko Nonomura, Kathleen Cooney, Alan Abrams, and Johanna (Jonni) Sue Bartel. Among the undated letters are notes from Allen Ginsberg and Tom Waits, and a poem from Jill Kroesen. Some letters are accompanied by music, such as a 1974 letter from Christian Wolff to Russell with a copy of "For 1, 2, or 3 People," and a 1975 letter to Russell from Cornelius Cardew, accompanied by a manuscript for his "Revolution is the Main Trend." The majority of the unsent or draft letters are to Steven Hall.

Printed material consists of programs, announcements, and flyers for performances by Russell and his peers. They advertise shows at the Anchorage, Dock's, Roulette, Jolly Munk, Sobossek's Bar, and Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Photographs consist of candid and posed shots of Russell, as well as a small amount of performance photographs. Most of the slides depict flowers and landscapes. Yuko Nonomura photographed the majority of the clouds pictured in the slides.

Arrangement: The collection is arranged alphabetically by subject or format.

Key Terms

Subjects

Avant-garde (Music) -- New York (State) -- New York
Disco Music
Music -- New York (State) -- New York -- 20th century

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Fliers (printed matter)
Lead sheets
Photographs
Poems
Posters
Scores
Songs (documents)
Sound recordings

Titles

Instrumentals
Tower of Meaning
World of Echo

Occupations

Musicians

Names

Wilson, Robert, 1941-
Loose Joints (Musical group)

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 *Another Thought* 1982-1993
Point Music
- b. 1 f. 2-4 Articles 1976-2004
- b. 1 f. 5 Biographical Materials 1960-2005
Original cello insurance papers (1960), resumes, biographical sketches, school materials, and articles.
- b. 22 f. 11 Biographical Materials 1993
Articles on Bessie Awards and New York Dance and Performance Award (Dance Theater Workshop).
Correspondence
- b. 1 f. 6-8 1967-1975
- b. 2 f. 1-10 1976-1991, Undated
Includes one file of outgoing letters.
- b. 22 f. 10 Letters from Jennifer Warnes 1970s-1980s
- b. 19 f. 7 Harmonicas 1970s
Two Marine Band harmonicas, made by M. Hohner (Germany, No. 1896); one housed in original box.
- b. 3 f. 1 Jackson Mac Low 1988
- b. 3 f. 2-3 Loose Joints 1978-1984
- b. 3 f. 4 Miscellaneous Day Notes 1984-1987, 2005
- b. 3 f. 5-9 Photographs and Slides 1960-1991, 2004
- b. 22 f. 9 Photograph 1980s
 - o. 1 Posters 1981-2008
Posters for the Necessaries, Arthur Russell (Rough Trade), *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*, and Lotus in the Mudd: A benefit for Dudjom Rinpoche, with Dinosaur L., Rocksteady Crew, Afrika Bambaataa, and Allen Ginsberg.
- Printed Material
- b. 3 f. 10-11 1968-Circa 1979
 - b. 23 f. 1 1970s-1980s
- b. 19 f. 8-10 1980-2004
 - b. 3 f. 12 Recording Invoices 1986
- b. 3 f. 13-14 Sire Records 1978-1980
 - b. 4 f. 1 *Tower of Meaning* 1974-1980
 - b. 4 f. 2 West End Records 1979-1981
 - b. 4 f. 3 *World of Echo* 1985, 1987
- Music
Music files contain manuscript sketches, drafts, and complete musical compositions written by Russell. Notes, lyrics, and poetry are also held in these files. Untitled, unsorted, and (largely) undated music precedes alphabetically arranged, titled files that were created by Russell.
- b. 23 f. 2-3 1960s-1980s
- b. 4 f. 4-11 1968, 1970s-1980s
Songs include "Springfield," "Rub My Head for Good Luck," "Taking My Whole Time," "The Gulf Stream Will Take Care of You," and "Keeping Up."
- b. 20 f. 1-9 1968, 1970s-1980s
Songs include "Big Band Piece," "Duet For Cello and Trombone," "Demo Circus," "Eli," "I'm a Wondering," and "I Really Wanted to Stay Awake."

Music (cont.)

- t. 1 1970s-1980s
Music written on rolled wrapping paper.
- b. 5 f. 1-8 1970s-1980s
Songs include "It Don't Make Me Sad Another Day," "In the Woods," "Maybe She," "Went By So Fast," "Soft as a Cherry," "Nobody Wants a Lonely Heart," "White Jet Smoke Trail," "Love is Overtaking Me," "My Sister Knows," and "I Couldn't Say it to Your Face," etc.
- b. 6 f. 1-7 1970s-1980s
Song titles include "Mr. Cat," "Come To Life Again," "Don't Forget About Me," and "My Sister Knows the Saddest People."
- b. 7 f. 1-7 1970s-1980s
Drafts, versions, or partial songs for "Calling All Kids," "Our Last Night Together," "Hop on Down," "Wax the Van," and "I'll Be Fencing."
- b. 8 f. 1-9 1970s-1991
Music and notes.
- b. 9 f. 1-2 24 --> 24 *Music* circa 1982
- b. 9 f. 3 Allen Ginsberg 1963-1983
- b. 9 f. 4 "Assorted Obscure Unintelligible Musical Compositions" circa 1968-1970s
- b. 9 f. 5 "Ballad of the Lights" circa 1977
- Binders**
These files contain materials originally held in binders and include music and notes from Russell's time in San Francisco.
- b. 9 f. 6-8 1960s-1980s
- b. 10 f. 1 1970s-1980s
- b. 21 f. 1 Notes From Binder 1960s
- b. 21 f. 2 "Catchalk Catchalk" 1970s-1980s
- b. 10 f. 2 Chord Sheets 1970s-1980s
Songs include "Bobby Don't Let Her Leave You Alone," "Ballad of the Lights" (parts I and II), "Oh Foolish Dream," and "Taking a Last Look at Love."
- b. 10 f. 3-4 Collected Poetry, Lyrics, and Songs 1965-1980s
- Composition Notebooks**
- b. 10 f. 5-7 1970s-1980s
Songs include "Canvas Home," "A Little Lost," "Me For Real," and "Anti Gravity [Soap]."
- b. 11 f. 1-7 1970s-1980s
- b. 12 f. 1-3 1970s-1980s
 - b. 12 f. 4 Concerned Parents Sessions 1980s
 - b. 12 f. 5 Ernie Brooks 1970s
 - b. 21 f. 3 "Etude For Beginners" 1970s-1980s
 - b. 21 f. 4 Experimental Music for Ezra Pound 1970s
 - b. 12 f. 6 Finished Compositions, Copies, and Manuscripts 1972
 - b. 12 f. 7-8 French Letter 1970s
- b. 12 f. 9-10 Fuzzbusters 1970s-1980s
 - b. 21 f. 5 "Goin' to/the South Pole" 1970s-1980s
 - b. 21 f. 6 "Goodbye, Old Paint" 1970s
 - b. 21 f. 7 Horns 1970s-1980s
Miscellaneous.
- b. 12 f. 11 "In the Woods" 1970s-1980s

Music (cont.)

- b. 12 f. 12 Incomplete Compositions 1970s-1980s
- b. 13 f. 1 Incomplete Compositions 1970s-1980s
- b. 13 f. 2 "Indian Ocean" 1970s-1980s
- b. 21 f. 8 *Instrumentals* circa 1974
- b. 13 f. 3-4 *Instrumentals* circa 1974-1986
Chord changes.
- b. 13 f. 5 Jerry Harrison circa 1981-1988
- b. 21 f. 9 "Judo Wash" 1970s
Transposed score.
- b. 22 f. 1 "Kannon Kyo Ge" circa 1968
- b. 13 f. 6 Keyboard Music 1970s
Includes "City Park."
- b. 13 f. 7 "Kiss Me Again" 1977-1978
Disco Project.
- b. 13 f. 8 "Lo" 1970s-1980s
- b. 13 f. 9 "Logo" 1970s-1980s
- b. 13 f. 10 "Love Dancing" and "The Heart Free" circa 1980
"Is It All Over My Face"
- b. 14 f. 1 Lyric Sheet Copies 1970s-1980s
- b. 22 f. 2 "Maka Hanna Haramita Shingyo" circa 1968-1970s
Also includes "Iowa Before the Snow/On the Ground" and "Eli."
- b. 14 f. 2-4 Miscellaneous 1970s
Charts and Renaissance vocal music.
- b. 14 f. 5 "My Tiger My Timing" 1970s
- b. 14 f. 6 Pencil Originals 1970s-1980s
- b. 14 f. 7 Peter Zummo 1977-1985
Includes "Submarine For One or Two Instrumentals."
- b. 22 f. 3 Peter Zummo 1980-1981
- b. 14 f. 8 Prajna-Paramita Sutra 1960s
- b. 23 f. 4 Psalms 13 and 150 1970s-1980s
- Robert Wilson
- b. 14 f. 9-11 *Medea Project* circa 1980
- b. 15 f. 1-6 *Medea Project* circa 1980
- b. 16 f. 1-6 *Medea Project* circa 1980
- b. 17 f. 1-6 *Medea Project* circa 1980
- b. 18 f. 1-6 *Medea Project* circa 1980-1982
- b. 22 f. 4 "Scene From Unknown Opera" 1970s
- b. 18 f. 7-8 Skeleton Songbook circa 1968-1969
- b. 19 f. 1 Sobossek's 1970s
- b. 22 f. 5 Sobossek's 1970s
- b. 19 f. 2 "Spring Field" 1970s-1980s
- b. 19 f. 3 "Summer" 1970s-1980s
- b. 19 f. 4 Talking Heads, Flying Hearts, Horns circa 1974

Music (cont.)

- b. 22 f. 6 "Three Pieces" 1970s-1980s
- b. 19 f. 5 *Tower of Meaning Originals* circa 1974
- b. 22 f. 7 *Tower of Meaning Originals* circa 1974
- b. 22 f. 8 Unaccompanied Duets 1970s
- b. 19 f. 6 "Waiting Til the Time is Right" 1970s-1980s