

Spotlight on Music Collections: “Freedom to Improvise: What the Paul Cram fonds Taught Me About Creativity and Archival Research”

In this edition of Spotlight on Music Collections, practicum student Madelaine Hare describes her work experience with the multimedia-rich Paul Cram Fonds in the Dalhousie Archives. She speaks to the challenges of working with archival description and draws parallels between approaches to archival research and the free jazz genre.

Spotlight on Music Collections aims to profile interesting or unique music collections and archives in Canada through the voices of those who work with them. If you have a suggestion for a collection or individual to be featured in a future edition of this column, please email: camlreview@caml-acbm.org.

Can you introduce yourself, your background, and how you came to work in the Dalhousie Archives?

As a student in Dalhousie University's Master of Information program, I had been looking forward to the workplace practicum component of the degree (a work-integrated learning opportunity) since, well, before I applied. I completed my Master of Arts at Dalhousie before starting the program and dreamt of working in the Archives that are situated on the fifth floor of the Killam Memorial Library. Upon being placed at the Dalhousie Archives for a three-week period, I anticipated my spring 2022 start date with nothing less than absolute enthusiasm. A winter term class on Archives held in the Nova Scotia Archives familiarized me with the provincial institution, but the Dalhousie Archives remained a mysterious place to me, though I studied just two floors below it for the better part of a decade. I had utilized archival collections for my MA and undergraduate theses research but had not experienced the other side of the relationship: appraising, arranging, describing, and preserving materials for other researchers' access and use. As a historian, I appreciated access to the online archival collections I studied but had only a modest conception of the theory and practice involved in making archival material accessible to the public.

I was fortunate to work under the expertise of Dalhousie's Digital Archivist, Creighton Barrett, and other staff who introduced me to the space, the practice of the core archival functions, and answered my barrage of questions.¹ The practicum placement stipulated 100 hours as a



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requirement of completion, but I dreaded that limited period coming to an end. I resolved to learn as much as I could in the field that I have had a longstanding desire to contribute to. My 100 hours were fulfilled in just under one month, signalling the end of my brief term in the Dalhousie Archives. By then, my conception of archival theory and practice had expanded more than I could have hoped.

Can you tell us a bit more about Paul Cram and the types of materials in his fonds?

Paul Cram [1952-2018] was a prolific Canadian jazz musician and composer who toured the country extensively.² He was a founding member and artistic director of the Upstream Music Association and formed many jazz ensembles and orchestra groups throughout his career. He composed for such entities, as well as for radio (primarily CBC), film, and theatre. Cram's multimedia fonds comprise manuscript scores, audio cassettes, DAT's, CD's, VHS tapes, and other materials. The collection consists of 15 boxes of multimedia materials accessioned in 2021 supplemented by a second accession in 2022 which included a folio containing oversized and graphic scores.

What did your work with the Paul Cram fonds look like?

I was tasked with processing the Paul Cram fonds during my practicum, and I completed my placement by beginning the development of a finding aids for the multi-level fonds. I processed these materials by learning my way through the core archival functions: appraisal, physical arrangement, rehousing, and description. After the material was first accessioned by staff at the Dalhousie Archives, I conducted my own initial appraisal of the material to get a sense of what was in the collection and to gain experience with the archival function. Cram kept his records well-organized and had arranged them in logical groupings for his own access and reference. I started with arranging and rehousing bound score and other loose folders of score in their original order. I began with silent film scores, moved to concerts, and then to Cram's various live sets and performances. After this, I worked my way through paper files: I rehoused a few personal items such as his day planner, his personal notebook and various ensemble promotional kits. After I finished with the paper files, I moved to sound recordings and arranged Cram's extensive collection of cassettes and DATs. We decided to use 8 different groupings as rational subseries for cassette description: concert works, film/video, theatre/radio drama, saxophone quartet, small jazz ensembles, Paul Cram Orchestra, and other works. I then logged each cassette and DAT into an Excel sheet detailing their information: title, subseries grouping, ensemble/artist, date, and other

¹ My experience working with the Paul Cram fonds is just one small part of the larger efforts that went into preserving the material. Staff at the Dalhousie Archives began processing the Paul Cram fonds before my placement and continued with the project after I left. I reflect here on my small, but hopefully meaningful, contribution to preserving the career work of an individual who touched countless lives through his music and leadership.

² "Cram, Paul," Dalhousie University Archives Catalogue, Dalhousie University Archives, accessed October 9, 2022, <https://findingaids.library.dal.ca/cram-paul>.

physical attributes. During my placement, I processed 352 cassettes and DATs and managed to describe the complete concert work subseries in the online catalogue- approximately 60 tapes. Creighton recommended I gain experience describing the regular and oversized concert scores, and so I described 3 folders of oversized scores and one promotional poster on the online catalogue. I also described one box of silent film scores (around 30 folders) in Dalhousie's online archival catalogue.

What would you describe as the main learning takeaways in working with a personal fonds such as this one?

Working through the core archival functions of a personal fonds while attempting to understand Cram as an individual was an interesting intellectual exercise for me, as it is I am sure, for many professional archivists. Cram was part of many different ensembles throughout his career in music. As I described material in the online catalogue, it was often difficult to distinguish whether entities such as the ETC (Ellis, Tanguay, Cram) Trio or the Paul Cram Quintet- two examples of groups Cram established- should be described as corporate entities or as people as they did not neatly fit into either category. Traditional archival definitions of entities are narrow indeed, and the controlled list did not offer a third option for "collective" or "community." Creighton explained how this often presents conceptual issues and ontological challenges in archival work. This dilemma provoked reflection on my part about how theory translates (or does not) into practice.

I found myself comparing the concept of entity types to my limited understanding of the genre of free jazz. For a free jazz musician, having a score to follow has many positive benefits: it provides structure and can be referenced for direction on how a piece should be approached by an individual instrument. However, free jazz musicians use scores as a guide to the overall piece, and "improvise" off them. Stuart Broomer referenced his take on the Paul Cram Orchestra album "Campin' Out" in a feature for *The Whole Note*, which summarizes the concept well:

The two streams in Cram's music, the improvised and the composed, come together in a very special way. The composition is less about giving the improvisation structure than the improvisation is about giving the orchestration fluidity and vice versa. Part of Cram's ambition is to have the composed portions move with the energy and spontaneity of collective improvisation, and it's something he achieves frequently here.³

In this respect, I could not help but see some parallels, or perhaps paradoxes, between the structure I was trying to impose on Cram's materials, while I was also just coming to know him as an individual, and as a creative.

³ Stewart Broomer, "Looking Back: Risk and Promise: Paul Cram (1952-2018)," *The Whole Note*, April 27, 2018, <https://www.thewholenote.com/index.php/newsroom/feature-stories/28026-looking-back-risk-and-promise-paul-cram-1952-2018>.

Can you expand on the process of coming to know Cram, and the impact of that insight in your work with his fonds?

As I went about processing Cram's personal collection, Creighton encouraged me to get to know Cram as a person by researching his life and career. I spent my 100 hours arranging, rehousing, and describing, but also listening to Cram's cassette tapes, reading his day planner, and developing a newfound regard for free jazz. I read the notes he left himself in drafts of score, sorted through pictures of him and his bandmates making goofy faces as they played their saxophones, and developed a profound sense through personal material, of how adored Cram was as a musician, friend, and family member. I am appreciative of Creighton's guidance in this respect; my consideration of Paul Cram's fonds as an amateur archivist was enriched by a deeper awareness of his lifetime of work, and how he touched the lives of the musicians and communities around him. Perhaps it was the jazz, or the desire to dive as deep as I could in a short period of time, but I extended my research and understanding of Cram by trying to immerse myself further into his world. When an email invitation landed in my inbox to a concert celebration of Upstream Music Association's 32nd anniversary at the Dalhousie Arts Centre, I promptly bought myself a ticket.

The Upstream Music Association, of which Cram was a co-founder, held their "birthday celebration" in June 2022. Upstream celebrated their musical legacy, now entering its fourth decade, through a live performance featuring the works of Cram and new pieces from contemporary members of the group joining from Symphony Nova Scotia and Dalhousie's Fountain School of Performing Arts. I sat in the Rebecca Cohn auditorium's left mezzanine. Gift bags provided at the entrance to the show equipped me with a shaker (and others with kazoos) to use for the audience engagement components of the concert. The Upstream Birthday party began with conductor Jeff Reilly offering a few words about Cram, his long-time friend. Reilly spoke of Cram's talent and unique way of writing "one-pagers" of score. Having processed such one-pagers, I was given more context and appreciation regarding their importance for preservation. I had read the names of Reilly and other members: Steven Naylor (piano), Chris Mitchel (saxophone), Dawn Hatfield (saxophone), Lukas Pearse (bass), Doug Cameron (drums), in Paul's scores many times. I had registered their names in a visual ontology I built with software one of my professors developed for a Data Management course. I used the tool to illustrate the relationship each musician had to one another, and Cram, to track all the different groups and ensembles Cram had formed and been part of (see Figure 1).

Reilly spoke about Cram with immense love and admiration at the Upstream Birthday celebration; his influence and positive impact on the musical community was instantiated by the musicians on stage that night and the songs they played. Witnessing Upstream's members play together made those colourful connecting lines come alive. I had struggled to interpret the visual scores found in the Cram fonds. It was difficult to conceptualize how a piece could be structured and offer its players the freedom to improvise in tandem. As the Upstream birthday party rolled on, I found myself laughing, humming, tapping my feet, elatedly waving my shaker, and tearing up at some points. Reilly and the other musicians created an atmosphere that made newcomers in the

audience feel like a part of the established Upstream community, which was evidently full of family members and friends. The music informed a more complete understanding of free jazz in my mind, which had previously perplexed me. The Upstream orchestra performed Cram's composition "Silent Movies" live that night alongside projected images of different animals dancing, offering context to the story the music was telling. As the music reached its crescendo, I thought about the parallels between a silent movie and a personal fond. One can gain a sense of its plot- and really follow it too- if they are paying attention. The addition of other sensual elements, however, truly animate it. Witnessing the impacts of Cram's relationships, his musical legacy, and hearing his compositions played by his friends and bandmates rather than through a cassette player gave me a newfound, nuanced understanding of him and his work. Working with Cram's collection was like watching a silent film. Hearing Upstream play brought his legacy to life.

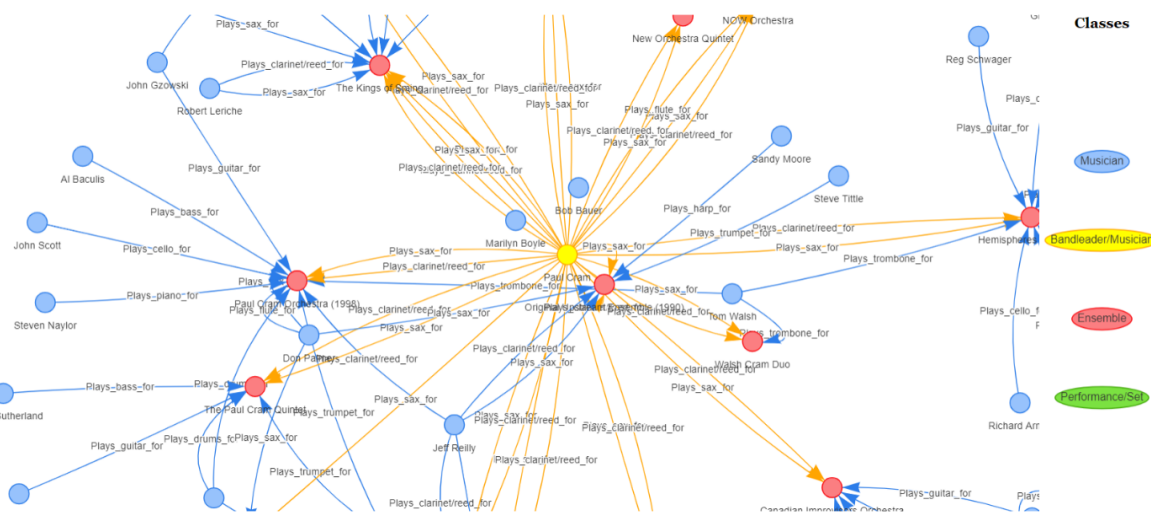


FIGURE 1. A VISUAL ONTOLOGY OF CRAM'S MUSICAL ECOSYSTEM.⁴

What takeaways do you have from this experience and what advice would you give to other students or early-career archivists or researchers?

As a second-year LIS student who is new to the field, I can only reflect on my brief fragment of time working with Cram's personal fonds, finally on the other side of the archivist-researcher relationship. Gaining this perspective both inspired me and provoked reflection about conducting

⁴ By no means a complete account of all of Cram's relationships and ensembles he established, with probably more than a few errors, this is how I went about making sense of the impact Cram had on the musical community. Even incomplete, it is apparent that Cram (the yellow dot in the centre) had a profound influence as a connector in Canada's jazz scene. Creating this supplement to my learning helped me to visualize the impact of Cram's life and cognate influences on his life. Interactive visualization available at: <https://maddshare.github.io/Paul-Cram/Paul-Cram-Network>

archival research and supplementing it in creative ways. As a researcher, I use available archival material and augment it with secondary sources. Working with Cram's materials pushed me to search for living traces- ongoing evidence of legacies and relationships- and extend them into new experiences of my own (such as attending a jazz concert) to supplement them. I submit this reflection in hopes that it might resonate with fellow early career archivists or researchers and encourage them to explore what sparks their interest and afford them greater confidence to improvise in their own intellectual pursuits. Thinking outside the box can truly lead to deeper understandings; I was lucky to work on the personal fonds of someone who was masterful at doing so.

How do you think your work with the Cram fonds will impact your approach to archival work in the future, and more broadly in the music community?

I deeply enjoyed my brief foray into archival work. Cram's multimedia fonds were a terrific entry point for an amateur archivist: they presented a diverse range of material to explore, intellectual challenges to contend with, and they taught me something new about music, and research. It was fascinating to learn about Cram as a musician and community-builder. I was grateful for the experience of glimpsing both his "inner soul", as Hobbs describes the discoveries of personhood in personal fonds, alongside the outer manifestation of his work in the public sphere.⁵ These personal connections made all the difference in generating my interest in free jazz, something I previously had no concept of. When archival material generates intrigue in researchers- or perhaps spurs them to buy a ticket to a free jazz show- then a legacy is not only kept alive but given new life. I hope this reflection inspires contemplation about how researchers can take inventive approaches to research. I will continue to consider how archivists can contribute to provoking this creativity when patrons might not have 100 hours, but only a few. Perhaps it begins with giving ourselves the freedom to improvise, and subsequently, the freedom to develop new understandings. I think Cram would approve.

⁵ Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria*, no. 52 (Fall 2001): 126, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12817>.