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LS590: Archival Outreach and Engagement

Archival Needs Assessment

This assessment outlines the identified need to provide archival interventions to engage, document, and preserve the rich community history surrounding the contributions of the Milledgeville-Baldwin County African American community in the formation and evolution of rhythm & blues and soul music. This project will expand the community's cultural heritage and highlight the community's lived experience. By focusing on community talent, innovation, and entrepreneurship, this project will leverage the community's pride in their stories, fostering more diversely informed and engaged community interactions.

1. Community description.

Located in the heart of the Central Georgia region, Milledgeville-Baldwin County is a historic and diverse community of 45,000 residents. Community demographics are comprised of 42% African American and 54% White residents, along with 4% other ethnicities. Home to three institutions of higher learning, education is a cornerstone of the community's economic and cultural vitality. However, Milledgeville-Baldwin County experiences the typical challenges of rural communities impacted by economic hardship. 2020 U.S. Census data reported an unemployment rate of 7.8%, with 22.9% of the population living in poverty.¹

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2020, Quick Facts, Baldwin County, Georgia, generated by Evan Leavitt <http://data.census.gov>; (12 July 2021).

Milledgeville's African American community is shaped by a rich tradition of education, entrepreneurship, and community pride that is anchored in strong cultural identity and institutions such as the church, schools, and businesses. For this community, cultural heritage manifests in many ways, representing unique spheres of agency, autonomy, and influence. One source of community pride is its rich history in the legacy of Black music in the United States. Mozart has been attributed to saying that music is not in the notes, but the silence in between. This idea carries heavy truth when considering the history of Black music. Black music is a response to centuries of hardship. The genuineness of Black music, from spirituals to hip hop, stems from the struggles and triumphs of Black people. We must hear Black music within this context to appreciate the power it harnesses.

Milledgeville-Baldwin County and the Central Georgia region was crucial in the formation and evolution of rhythm & blues and soul music. The seminal Georgia artists Little Richard, Ray Charles, Otis Redding, and James Brown introduced to the world new, exciting sounds. Local juke joints, such as the Ebony Lounge, Shady Rest, and the Do-Drop-In, served as incubators for these artists who influenced the course of American music. The residents of Milledgeville and the surrounding area had the opportunity to see the stars at night and witnessed history being made. The more you listen to the music made in Milledgeville and the surrounding area; you realize it has a "sound." It can be found in the field recordings of inmates created by John Lomax and Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter at the Georgia State Penitentiary in 1934, and the sounds of Gloria Walker and the Chevelles, who sang their soul music all the way to the Apollo Theatre. From the funk of Black Gold by the Mighty Chevelles, to Pep Brown's smooth delivery, and the blessed voices of the Piney Grove Singers of Milledgeville. Let us not be deaf to the music or

blind to the historical context in which it was crafted but let us celebrate the sound of Milledgeville and the stories of perseverance. These stories are being lost.

2. Community Need.

The community is motivated to participate in the preservation of historical artifacts and community memory due to the realization that the community is changing and, in many ways, disappearing. The Milledgeville-Baldwin County community and its various heritage institutions hold a wide variety of historical materials. However, we acknowledge that there is a deficiency in diversity amongst our university's holdings and that community artifacts representing the African American experience is lacking. Since Milledgeville is the antebellum state capital of Georgia, the majority of our holdings related to African Americans is focused on the institution of slavery and the transition from enslavement to freedom during the period of Reconstruction after the conclusion of the American Civil War. Therefore, there is a need to expand the community's cultural heritage through initiatives aimed at redressing the inadequacies found in the archival record that gives consideration to the diversity of experiences of African Americans who call our community home.

3. Suggested Archival Intervention.

An endeavor of this nature should be approached holistically. The digitization of cultural materials and the collection of oral histories will be paired with workshops aimed at educating the community in the care and preservation of their cultural heritage. Additionally, the community will be provided agency in determining the access level and description of donated

and shared digital and physical cultural heritage materials. This positions the archival representation into the hands of the represented. To place the collected cultural heritage materials in situ of their context, a physical, traveling, and digital exhibit will be constructed. A traveling exhibit will be made available to Middle Georgia public-school systems with curriculum targeting 8th grade Georgia history students and music programs. Lastly, the creation of a driving tour that highlights the juke joints of Baldwin County will introduce communities and tourists to this rich history. By contextualizing the collected materials and presenting them in a variety of formats, we hope to generate community awareness of the importance of the historical context that music is made within. At the same time, the community will be educated on the talent that sprung from it and how the area was an eye witness to the evolution of music; thus fostering informed, engaged communities.