

all concerts are all-ages: archiving the fugazi live series

darrell mcindoe

As a young punk rocker growing up in our nation's capital no band had a greater impact on my world than Fugazi. Playing their first show in September of 1987, when I was only three years old, I can't claim any sort of contemporary existence with the heyday of Fugazi's special brand of punk attitude, DC sound and DIY ethics. However there is no doubt that I definitely reaped the benefits of their trail-blazing and their legacy. While I think many in DC thought the band might last forever, seven albums, a documentary film and a thousand or so shows after that first one in '87 Fugazi went on indefinite hiatus in 2001.

I was lucky enough to see them perform several times in junior high school and high school. There was always something special about seeing Fugazi live, they strove to include the audience on a level that no other band I've seen really does. In fact their whole ethos seemed to revolve around accessibility of their material to the widest possible audience. Quoth their only press release, "The band maintains a policy of affordable access to their work through low record and ticket prices and all concerts are all-ages." This motto of sorts would be adopted by many of the punk bands in the DC area and elsewhere. Even my high school band, modestly (cough) successful though we were, held rigid to the low-cost, all-ages standard we had seen Fugazi set.

Bummed as I have been all these years by the prospect of never seeing Fugazi in a live setting again I was understandably excited when I heard in 2009 that a friend

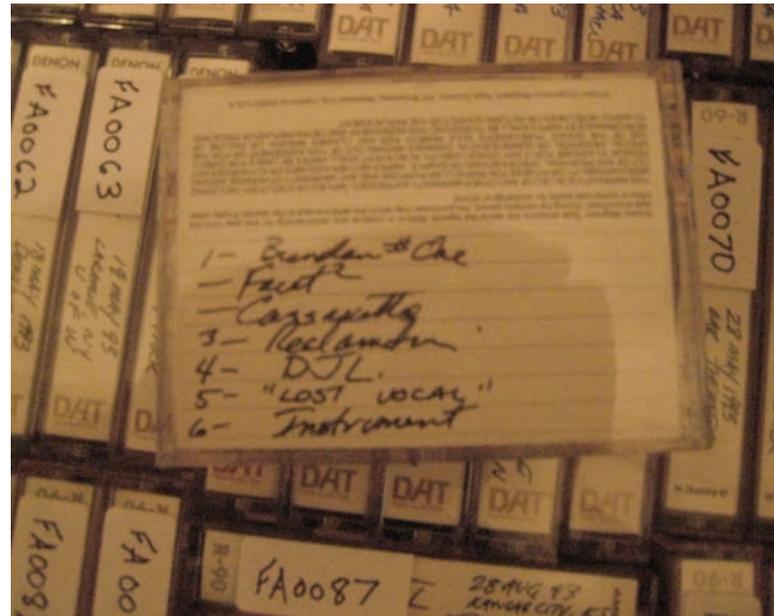
of mine, Peter Oleksik, would be helping Fugazi frontman and songwriter Ian MacKaye to catalog and digitize an almost complete collection of the band's live recordings, along with related demos, tour materials, videos and band paraphernalia for his thesis for the Moving Image Archiving & Preservation Program at NYU.



The majority of the Fugazi material resided for years in boxes in a room in Dischord House, both a home to some of the band members and the base of operations for Fugazi's record label Dischord Records. Peter began his archival process with a trip down to DC to assess the collection with Ian.

Over the course of two weeks they were able to divide the overall collection into three distinct collections, the Fugazi archive, the Dischord archive, and Ian's personal materials and archive. Peter decided to focus on the Fugazi materials first as they were at the most risk of deterioration and technological obsolescence. In his own words, "[I] decided to do the Fugazi live series stuff because it hadn't been cataloged...it was roughly in chronological order...it was a lot of DATs and DATs are really fragile and quickly becoming obsolete."

Focusing on the modest amount of video material and the veritable mountain of DAT tapes and cassette recordings of Fugazi performances, Peter set out to catalog and digitize everything. He proceeded to organize everything chronologically, while setting up a database of meta-data including date, running time, physical description of the media, and any attached notes about individual shows like location, set lists, and door price. Unsurprisingly for a band so concerned about accessibility and transparency, Fugazi (meaning mostly Ian and sound guy Joey P) had kept meticulous records about nearly all of Fugazi's over a thousand shows.



From start to finish Ian had a great interest in the process being as open as possible, and as Peter relates, perhaps too open. Going against traditional archival "best practices," when they came upon something they couldn't identify Ian would just pop it in the boombox for a listen. Says Peter, "You never want to play anything back for the risk that you would hurt it...but it was awesome at the same time." Indeed, what's the fun of archiving all these shows if you can't listen to them?

It was during this cataloging process, which Peter refers to, in an almost Foucaultian sense, as "gaining intellectual control" that the idea came to digitize the live recordings and offer them for sale on the web as a way of retroactively paying for the whole process. However more important to Ian was the opportunity for these live recordings to

serve a purpose other than sitting in a box in his room forever. Settling on “5 bucks per show,” an old Fugazi inside joke about being able to sell anything for five dollars, Ian even suggest allowing one free show download for anyone as long as they wrote a paragraph or two about why they wanted it. And in true Fugazi style Ian was able to turn something as institutional as the archival process into something which could involve the fans.

After cataloging everything the cassettes were all moved to more preservation-oriented cases, but they still needed somewhere to be housed. It seemed for Peter that cardboard boxes on the floor weren't an option. Then Ian led Peter to the basement of Dischord House where a friend, some years ago, had pulled an old library card catalog out of the dumpster and dragged it all the way home. Serendipitously the cassettes fit nicely in each card drawer in rows of two. So now all the Fugazi live series originals are housed happily and anachronistically in a stately old wooden library card catalog.



The next step in the process was the actual digitization. While cassettes are fairly straightforward to dump to digital, DATs can be a little tricky. Peter was able to use know-how gained from trial and error to trick an old DAT machine into dumping the data digitally and at four times the normal speed. This saved a lot of time and work for a process that can be time consuming at best, downright monotonous at worst. Between Peter, Ian and roadie Joey P they made it through all the DATs and the piles of cassette tapes. After about a year and a half of working on this all the live shows are digitized, tracked and being prepped to be uploaded to the storefront website.

However the end product couldn't have been made possible without the scaffolding that is the database at the project's heart. Thanks to the notes kept by Ian and others about Fugazi's tours, it was then easy to match even

more data about shows, dates and locations to the data culled from the materials during the collection assessment. According to Peter all this data should be accessible when the website goes live, and users will be able to search in similar ways, cross-referencing a show they went to with other shows Fugazi may have played in the same town, other bands they played with on that tour, or shows throughout the years with similar set lists.

And this record of the life of Fugazi is also fairly unique. Although other bands have sought to record whole tours or make their live recordings available to the fans at free or reduced cost, no other band that I could find has a complete archive of (nearly) every show they have ever played to work with. In fact Peter related that out of a little over a thousand shows that Fugazi played there are only about fifty missing from the record. Both Peter and Ian are hoping that the Fugazi live series website will

encourage fans who may have bootlegged the shows in question to come forward and fill in the gaps. In this way Peter's work has produced both a preservation-based archive and an access-driven online collection.

In fact Peter even floated the idea early on of donating the material of the Fugazi archive to a special collection at a university library, possibly the very local George Washington University which also happens to have an open access policy. Ian seemed to play down that idea for now, and despite Dischord House not being the best of conditions for preservation's sake, it is the place where the collection will remain for now. Even Peter admitted, "The history of that house just fits with what's there. And [Ian]'s totally happy to help anyone out who wants to see this stuff." But as Peter points out, when the time does come and both Fugazi and Ian no longer walk this earth, the majority of the work will have been done to preserve this body of material for future generations.



After living this experience vicariously through Peter I was impressed with the amount of thought and reflection that went into the whole process, and also with the amount of work. From the largest institution to the smallest independent band or record label, the archival process is no easy task. There are a million decisions which need to be made, and tightrope that gets walked between preservation and access. But in the end it was no surprise to me that Fugazi was the band doing something like this. For a band with such an emphasis on community, participation and access it was only fitting that they would turn their entire body of work into something as amazing as this archive. It is comforting to know that Fugazi's archive won't sit on some dusty shelf, and that their music and their live presence will be accessible to a new generation of prospective fans.

“Don't you know things have settled
down, down, down
But silence is a dangerous sound,
We must, we must,
we must keep our eyes open,
See what we see,
what once was promised now will be.”

- Fugazi, “KYEO”

