

Concordia University Libraries Special Collections

Finding Aid - Alex Robertson fonds (P023)

Generated by Access to Memory (AtoM) 2.3.0 Printed: October 12, 2016
Language of description: English

Concordia University Libraries Special Collections
Vanier Library, VL 121
Concordia University
7141 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal
Quebec
Canada
H4B 1R6

Telephone: 514-848-2424 x 7774

[Email: spec-coll@concordia.ca](mailto:spec-coll@concordia.ca)

<https://library.concordia.ca/find/special-collections/>

<http://concordia.accesstomemory.org/index.php/alex-robertson-collection>

Alex Robertson fonds

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Summary information

Repository: Concordia University Libraries Special Collections

Title: Alex Robertson fonds

ID: P023

Date: 1853-1988 (date of creation)

Physical description: 1,252 sound recordings
7.5 m of textual records
15 photographs

**Dates of creation,
revision and deletion:**

Administrative history / Biographical sketch

Note

Alexander Robertson was born in 1907 in Thorburn, Nova Scotia. He married Angela Julie Baccanale of Montreal in 1943. They had four children: Jennie, James, Anthony, and Alexandra. He died September 10, 1986 in Montreal.

At age 18 he travelled to Vancouver, where he graduated from business college. Through the 1930s he worked as expediter, foreman, and service and production manager, first in Halifax, and from 1935 in Montreal. In 1941, he enlisted in the naval reserve at HMCS Donnacona Montreal RCNVR and left the next year for the regular Navy as a Petty Officer Writer, stationed at Stadacona, Halifax. In 1943 he was drafted on a destroyer leading a convoy to Ireland. After the war he returned to Truro, Nova Scotia. He moved to Montreal in 1949, and worked in the textile industry. He worked in the payroll department of Royal Victoria Hospital from 1967. He retired in 1972 and then did two more years of volunteer work in the hospital's credit union. After that he devoted most of his time to his hobbies.

As a child he had piano and violin lessons, and as a teenager he played banjo and organized an orchestra that played at school dances and socials. During the time he was in the Navy, Alex became interested in jazz and started what was to become a major collection of jazz recordings. His research in Montreal newspapers led to a chronology of musical performances, including jazz, in Montreal between 1913 and 1970. For four decades he researched the record industry, specializing in American jazz recorded in Canada. He compiled the Canadian Compo Numericals, the Apex 8000 Numerical, the Canadian Gennett Series 9000 with the history of the Starr-Gennett recording company, and the Rare Canadian Aurora Label from Victor Masters. It and the Gennett series discographies were published in Record Research . By compiling the company discographies he was able to determine the origin of the recordings in his collection, distinguishing those recorded in the studio in Montreal from those pressed from master tapes recorded in the United States. Thus he identified well known American musicians who recorded in Montreal using pseudonyms. The Discophile Society called Alex Robertson a discographical scientist.

Custodial history

The fonds was transferred from Concordia University's Records Management and Archives Department to Concordia University Libraries' Special Collections March 9, 2016, and March 15-17, 2016, April 21, 2016, April 26-28, 2016, May 3, 2016, and May 10, 2016.

Scope and content

Between 1940 and 1986, Alex Robertson collected records. Most of the recordings in the fonds are 78 rpm's pressed in Montreal by Berliner and Compo: Berliner was the first Canadian company to produce records, and Compo was the first to record Canadian Black musicians. The fonds contains a large number of sound recordings that have never had commercial or widespread distribution. The fonds includes about 3,000 pieces of sheet music of various genres, dating from ca 1885 to 1970; about 1,000 pieces have Canadian content. The fonds includes numerous catalogues and promotional pamphlets from record and sheet-music publishing companies, dealers, clubs, and radio stations. Also included are books annotated by Alex Robertson in the course of his disco-graphical research. Alex Robertson's research materials on record labels and series, as well as on Montreal musical activity between 1913 and 1970 are included in the fonds. His extensive correspondence and related newsletters are included. The fonds includes photographs of Alex Robertson with his family; there is also a photograph of Alex Robertson with jazz author George Martin, and several of a reception held in his honor in the Concordia University Archives reading room in 1988.

The fonds is organized into the following series:

P023/A Correspondence

P023/B Research on record labels and series

P023/C Research on Montreal music activity

P023/D Photographs

Notes

Title notes

- **Variations in title:** Previously known as the Alex Robertson collection
- **Source of title proper:** Title based on the content of the fonds.

Immediate source of acquisition

Alex Robertson donated the documents to the Concordia University Archives shortly before he died in 1986.

Arrangement

The material was already separated when it arrived in the Concordia University Archives. The series were determined according to the collector's divisions.

Conditions governing use

Reproduction for scholarly purposes is permitted in most cases.

Use of material in a publication may only be done with permission of the copyright owner.

Finding aids

An inventory of the Alex Robertson collection P023 is available for consultation at the Concordia University Archives.

Accruals

No further accruals expected.

Other notes

- **Publication status:** Published
- **Level of detail:** Full
- **Status description:** Final
- **Rights:** Copyright belongs to the creator(s).
- **Rights:**

Access points

- Textual record (documentary form)
- Graphic material (documentary form)
- Sound recording (documentary form)
- Jazz (subject)

Series descriptions

Series P023/A: Correspondence

Date: 1950-1985 (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Mr. Robertson corresponded with several people to exchange information about records, entertainers and numerals. Some of his correspondents really helped him in his research while he helped others in their own field. He also received several newsletters which he filed with his correspondence. These newsletters were used to establish contacts with other collectors or sent by correspondents.

Mr. Robertson established a file for each correspondent. The system remains the same; the files were classified in alphabetical order and the letters in chronological order.

Series A includes Don Cleary's collectors directory - 1977. Some of the addresses of Mr. Robertson's correspondents were taken from that directory.

Some miscellaneous notes and photocopies were grouped together but not organized by subject. These refer to a variety of subjects discussed in the correspondence but cannot be associated with any particular letter or correspondent. Since Mr. Robertson filed these material with his correspondence, it has been left in that series.

Some letters which had only the correspondent's first name or no name at all were found in the collection. These could not be placed with any other letters and have been grouped together in an "Anonymous" file.

Physical description: 0.3 m of textual records

Access points:

- Textual record (documentary form)

File / item list

Series P023/B: Research on Labels and Series

Date: 1862-1986 (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Mr. Robertson did extensive research on record labels pressed in Lachine by the Compo Company Limited. His objectives were to correct the inaccuracies often found in the record catalogues and to find out which musicians recorded under more than one name, either in Canada or another country. He achieved three lists of numericals: (1) The Apex 8000 Numerical, (2) Canadian Compo Numericals, and (3) Canadian Gennett and Starr-Gennett 9000 Numerical. Some of this work was done with the help of George Humble and many of his other correspondents. Mr. Robertson's work on numericals was partly published in *The Record Research*, a periodical, in 1983 and 1986. This series includes Mr. Robertson's documentation, research notes and lists.

Mr. Robertson used various materials to complete his research; record catalogues and pamphlets, periodicals and books. These have been filed in alphabetical order and are described in the following categories: (1) Record Catalogs and Brochures, (2) Periodicals, and (3) Annotated Books.

Mr. Robertson collected many record catalogs and brochures to work on his lists of numericals. In them he found a lot of inaccuracies and tried to correct them in his final lists. This category includes all the catalogues and brochures collected by Mr. Robertson. They have been organized into 7 sections: (1) Record Companies, (2) Independent Companies, (3) Independent Dealers, (4) Public Bodies, (5) Radio Stations, (6) Record Clubs, and (7) Sheetmusic Catalogues. Within each of these sections, the material is organized alphabetically by company and then, chronologically.

Mr. Robertson collected many music periodicals. Some of them are specifically about jazz. This category includes all the periodicals kept in the Archives. They are classified chronologically. A list of the discarded periodicals is also available.

Mr. Robertson collected many books to help him in his research. Those which he annotated have been kept in the Archives. This category includes a listing of these books.

The collection contains about 1000 78 rpm records, most of which were pressed in Montreal by Berliner and Compo. Berliner was the first Canadian record production company and Compo was the first one to produce black musician's records. A database was established to list and provide access to the records. The data can be accessed by: Item number, Company, Label, Catalog number, Title, Type of music, Recording artist, and Composer.

The Alex Robertson collection contains about 3000 pieces of sheet music, which include various kinds of music, such as jazz, popular, country, contemporary and classical. About 1000 of them have a canadian content; i.e. the music was written by a canadian author, published in Canada, or the sheet music was sold by a canadian store or had an insert that would confirm it was originally performed by a canadian artist. The computer program was established to list and provide access to the sheet music. The data can be accessed by: Item number, Title, Composer, Lyricist, Names in comments, Publisher, Place of publication, Type of music, Copyright date, and Photo on cover.

Physical description: 7 m of textual records
1,252 sound recordings

Access points:

- Textual record (documentary form)
- Sound recording (documentary form)

File / item list

Series P023/C: Research on Montreal Music Activity

Date: 1853-1985 (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Mr. Robertson had many research subjects. Among them was one regarding musical activities in Montreal. He worked extensively on a list of all the performers, Canadian or not, who appeared in Montreal between 1913 and 1970. To achieve this task, he went through newspapers covering that period, including: La Presse, The Montreal Gazette, The Montreal Star, The Montreal Herald, The Montreal Standard, and La Patrie, The Montreal Daily. He compiled two lists, one alphabetical and the other chronological, both of which include the dates and places of performance. A database has been established to enter this data in the computer. It is accessible by: Entertainer's Name, Date of Performance, and Venue.

In addition to Montreal music activity, Mr. Robertson investigated other show business areas, such as: American vaudeville artists, Vaudeville artists, Rock n'roll bands, Montreal's musicians and bands, American comedy, Country music, Dance music, Dixieland jazz band, Quebec's burlesque theater, and Who's who in jazz.

This series also includes Mr. Robertson's research notes on all those subjects and the lists that he established.

Physical description: 0,2 m of textual records

File / item list

Series P023/D: Photographs

Date: 1943-1988 (date of creation)

Scope and content:

This series includes photographs and negatives of Mr. Robertson with members of his family and George Martin.

It also includes photographs of the reception held in honor of Alex Robertson's memory at Concordia University Archives in 1988.

Physical description: 14 photographs

Access points:

- Graphic material (documentary form)

File / item list