Archives in Context
Season 8 Episode 2: Pat Thomas
Aired February 13, 2024 • Length: 15:20 minutes

SPEAKERS
Chris Burns, Camila Zorrilla Tessler, and Pat Thomas

SUMMARY KEYWORDS
Allen Ginsberg, book, archives, podcast, items, author, music, musicians, biographies, counterculture

Intro 00:10
From the Society of American Archivists, this is Archives in Context, a podcast highlighting archival literature and technologies and most importantly, the people behind them.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 00:28
Hello, and welcome to another episode of Archives in Context, a Society of American Archivists podcast. I'm Camila Zorrilla Tessler.

Chris Burns 00:36
And I'm Chris Burns.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 00:38
Today our guest is Pat Thomas, a counterculture historian and archival music producer. He's authored books such as Listen, Whitey! The Sights & Sounds of Black Power 1965–1975, as well as served as coeditor on My Week Beats Your Year: Encounters with Lou Reed. In addition to his extensive written work, he was also a consultant on the PBS documentary The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution. His most recent work is Material Wealth: Mining the Personal Archive of Allen Ginsberg, and he's here to speak to us today about that book, Ginsberg, and using the archive. Welcome, Pat.

Pat Thomas 01:20
Thank you. Good to be here.

Chris Burns 01:22
So Pat, this book is a beautiful selection of Ginsberg's personal archives, and it almost reads as a love letter to the archive itself. Can you talk about the impetus for the format you chose as opposed to something more akin to a biography?
**Pat Thomas 01:38**

Well, the world is filled with Ginsberg biographies, so for me to do another one would be superfluous. And then, besides the regular career span of biographies, there’s dozens and dozens of books on a specific time period of Ginsberg, whether it's Ginsberg in Paris or—right. The marketing hyperbole for this book is this is the only Ginsberg book of its kind. And I don't think I'm going to be challenged on that comment, which is that no one had ever gone through. Ginsberg saved, you know, I'm just using ballpark figures, maybe 100,000 items, and I went through with Peter Hale at the Ginsberg Estate about 20,000 of them and then boiled it down to whatever's in the book, let's say there's I don't know if 600 or something, right. So, this is, this is, for people who haven't seen the book yet, it's a sort of a museum exhibition catalog for an exhibition that doesn't exist, right. And it really covers not only his whole life, but it covers his interactions with a lot of other people, whether it's fellow Beats, or Patti Smith, or Lou Reed. It covers, besides photographs, the reason why it's akin to a museum exhibition catalog, there’s a lot of just items, you know, there was- we're taking photographs of physical artifacts, posters, letters, daily journals, that sort of thing. So, it's a very unique book in connection to Ginsberg, probably a unique book just in general. There's, you know, very few of these things. They just put out a Dylan one from the Dylan Center in Oklahoma that's somewhat similar, you know.

**Camila Zorrilla Tessler 03:28**

Thank you. So, can you tell us a story that surprised you when you were going through this material?

**Pat Thomas 03:37**

Well, one surprising thing is just how much of it is—there is, you know. I think you also were going to ask about items, you know, with something this large, I'm not going to boil it down to one item, there's several items. One is, at some point, probably in the 1960s or early 70s, when someone like George Lincoln Rockwell was running the American Nazi Party, Ginsberg somehow heard that they were going to assassinate him for being probably a gay, commie Jew. And so, he wrote back and said, "Why don't we get to sit down and talk about this assassination attempt that you're planning on my life?" I thought that was kind of unique. There's fun little items like a 1974 ticket stub when Bob Dylan and the band reunited and toured the United States. No surprise, Dylan was at a concert. He obviously ran into Yoko Ono and scribbled her home phone number on the back. There’s a very funny parody of Ginsberg's most iconic poem "Howl," written by Terry Southern, another notable writer, as "Towel." And then there's even sort of benign things. For example, I wrote a book about Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies in the Chicago Eight trial. So, Ginsberg kept his plane tickets to go testify at the Chicago Eight trial, right. Not that exciting of an item in and of itself, but it's really you can sort of track a lot of Ginsberg's daily life through just the mass amount of stuff. And then lastly, he was a fan of other people. He saved a 1971 poster advertising Patti Smith's first ever public poetry appearance, and I wouldn't be surprised if Patti doesn't have that, right, like, he might have been the only guy who thought, oh, this, this, you know, this is cool. I'll save this, you know.

**Chris Burns 05:35**

So often, as archivists, we forge pretty deep relationships with the material that we process. And you've already talked about how your book is kind of unique, it's a sort of unusual way of presenting the sort of the deep pieces in this particular archive. And you talked a little bit about the process of going from 20, or sorry, 100,000 items
to 20,000 to 600. Could you go a little deeper with that? How, how did that, that seems like a monumental task in some ways, you know, how did-

**Pat Thomas 06:15**
Time and patience, you know, like, how did they uncover Pompeii?

**Chris Burns 06:20**
Uh huh. So, it's like an, it's like an archeological dig?

**Pat Thomas 06:24**
Well, you just got to do it. I mean, you know, I mean a lot of authors and archivists, who don't actually work, they just whine. Right? Just do it. Don't talk about it. Don't complain. Just get in there and do the work. I mean, people are sometimes amazed, like, I can't- Pat, I can't believe you've written seven books. Yeah, cuz I just, you just do it. You know, I don't I don't know how else to say it. You know, I mean, one thing I'll say that was helpful, is Stanford, and God knows how long it took them to do it, the archive is very well catalogued in terms of whether it's, you know, there's genre, there's date, there's location. So, I wasn't pulling random boxes; I was able to go through a massive sort of written archive and go give me boxes 7, 14, 34, 75, 102, 105, you know. And even then, obviously, you don't know exactly what you're going to get, but you've, at least you know that there's going to be some nuggets in each of those boxes, based on the description of what's in those boxes.

**Chris Burns 07:29**
So, was there a moment in doing that, that sort of process- I'm sure you went into it with a bit of a framework, you know, was the- was the book sort of already sketched out in your mind and break it out? Or did the process of discovery...

**Pat Thomas 07:44**
Well, the book is, you know, I picked boxes based on my personal interests, right. You know, one of my previous books was an oral and visual history of Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, the Yippies, the Chicago Eight. So, if I saw boxes with that on it, I went for it, right. Obviously, there was plenty of things about Kerouac and Burroughs and I did use some of it, but that has been done to death, right. Since I'm into music, there's a lot of Bob Dylan in the book, right. So, I just, and then often, frankly, you know, you're gonna just stumble on stuff, in other words, you know, you pick box 78 because, you know, there's a photo of Fred Flintstone in there, and then you realize there's also Barney Rubble, and so you decide to use both, right. So, a lot of it is just happy accidents.

**Chris Burns 08:37**
So, Pat, we sort of led with your bio; your work as an archival music producer, you've done some work previously on some Ginsberg music CDs. You close the book with a section on music recordings. You talked in one of your previous answers about that being a big interest of yours. There's a forthcoming audio soundtrack to accompany the book. So, wondering what you can tell our listeners about this soundtrack and about Allen Ginsberg’s musical legacy, why was he drawn to music? Why were musicians drawn to him?

**Pat Thomas 09:18**
You know, there's a sort of not so well-known funny story where Phil Spector, infamous legendary music producer, is producing a Leonard Cohen album. Of course, Leonard Cohen is a notable poet-turned-songwriter. And Bob Dylan and Ginsberg are hanging out in Los Angeles, and they realize that this recording session is going on, so they stopped by, and they wind up singing on one of the Leonard Cohen tracks. And Dylan turns to Phil Spector at some point and says, "You should work with Ginsberg, he's got words." So, rock musicians were attracted to Ginsberg because before people like Dylan, or the Beatles, or Patti Smith, or others were doing sort of stream of consciousness provocative rock lyrics, Ginsberg a decade or two earlier was doing it with poems like "Howl," so they were naturally drawn to Ginsberg during his lifetime, wanting to collaborate. And Ginsberg, you know, he always stayed current, you know, he's, we think of him as the Beat generation, but he becomes an icon during the 60s hippie years and even becomes an icon during the 1970s punk rock years. He collaborates and performs with The Clash, for example, you know, iconic punk band. So, the mutual admiration society went both ways, Ginsberg wanting to align himself with musicians and vice versa. And Ginsberg himself was very schooled, sort of self-taught on blues recordings, he could talk about, you know, vintage blues recordings all day long. And so, after a while, you know, obviously he recorded spoken word albums, but he began to record songwriting, you know, where he was singing and playing. He was a simple musician. He played an instrument called the harmonium or pump organ. But he could rope in Dylan, or McCartney, or Philip Glass to play with him. And so, my soundtrack CD, much like the book, it's called Material Wealth, and it's it's sort of a career-spanning collection of Allen, reading some of his classic poems through the years, as well as performing with some of these iconic rock musicians I just mentioned.

Chris Burns  11:40
Great. One more question, which is, so it seems clear this book will be of interest to people who are already fans of Allen Ginsberg. What about somebody who's new to Ginsberg?

Pat Thomas  11:58
You know, Ginsberg, as I just rattled off everything from the 1960s hippies to punk rock, to the Chicago Eight trial to Terry Southern, you know, Ginsberg, is if you're interested in the counterculture of the twentieth century United States, you know, he's a key part. So, you don't really have to know anything about Ginsberg to find the book fascinating, because you're going to see all these other names and you're going to see all these other images, whether it's Amiri Baraka or Norman Mailer, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Anne Waldman, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, drummer-jazz drummer Elvin Jones. So, it's it's I think there's a more universal appeal here than just someone who's curious about Ginsberg. It's like, if you, like I said, if you want to look at the twentieth century in America, at least the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and how it evolves, from Beats to hippies to punks to everything in between, this book will help you.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler  13:06
Those are all our questions. That's great. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else that you want to you want to add before we ceremoniously end this podcast?

Pat Thomas  13:17
No, you know, I think I think we've covered it. You know, I like I just to repeat myself, I think it's, uh, you know, I'm not just saying this because I'm the author, but, you know, there's that cliche: a picture's worth 1,000 words.
And so, if there's 600 photos in here; this is a 600,000 word book. And the last thing I'll say, for those who haven't seen it, it's not just a collection of photographs or images, I've annotated a lot of these images, I've told little curious, funny backstories. There's some essays sprinkled throughout the book and legendary poet Anne Waldman wrote the introduction. She's one of the few remaining sort of Beat icons still with us. So, that was kind of cool too.

**Camila Zorrilla Tessler** 14:06
Thank you again for your time. So again, the book, which is called *Material Wealth: Mining the Personal Archive of Allen Ginsberg*, authored by Pat Thomas. It's a beautiful book, I've had the opportunity to look at it and look through it, and I hope that our listeners get the same chance.

**Pat Thomas** 14:28
Thank you.

**Chris Burns** 14:29
Thanks for talking with us, Pat.

**Camila Zorrilla Tessler** 14:30
Thank you.

**Pat Thomas** 14:31
Okay, bye bye.

**Outro** 14:34
You've just listened to an episode of the *Archives in Context* podcast, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Rose Buchanan, Chris Burns, Mary Caldera, Abigail Christian, Stephanie Luke, Nicole Milano, Lolita Rowe, Camila Zorrilla Tessler, and Anna Trammell. All opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to subscribe and listen wherever you get your podcasts or at archivesincontext.archivists.org. And join us again next time.