

THE ALLEY LP: PERSPECTIVES & RECOLLECTIONS

Interviews about The Alley conducted on the occasion of *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960–1980*

This album was created by Sojourner Scholars alumni and Smart Museum of Art docents Nyla Evans Conway, Devell Jordan, Ariana Strong, and Sandra Swift, with support from Lamar Gayles, Jeanne Lieberman, Kai Parker, and Marya Spont-Lemus.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

In the summer of 2018, the four Scholars were asked to draw on their experiences studying contemporary Black Chicago artists (through their previous work with the Sojourner Scholars Program and the Smart Museum), as well as their own personal and creative interests, in order to develop an original interpretive piece for this exhibition. Supported by project facilitators, the Scholars determined the focus and format of the piece, and aimed to help visitors gain deeper appreciation and feeling for the work in this exhibition by having artists' and musicians' voices resound in the gallery. They also sought to draw connections between the past and the present, especially for Museum visitors who, like the Scholars and facilitators, weren't yet alive during the period of time covered by the exhibition *The Time Is Now!*

As our group explored the exhibition materials together and learned about the vibrant cultural life of Black Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s, we engaged questions about the relationship between art, politics, and pleasure; the struggle for Black autonomous space; interactions between musical and visual arts; the role of art in everyday life and in building community; and more. The Scholars reflected on how and to what extent the issues that impacted the art in the show resonate (or are in tension) with their experiences of living in Chicago today. In our group—and in conversation with the people they later interviewed—the Scholars discussed changes in the ways and places in which people gather, particularly how people create digital communities that negotiate transformations in the urban landscape. The Scholars also considered to what degree Black unity has frayed and to what degree it has been reinvented, and how the politics and aesthetics of Black arts spaces referenced in the exhibition might relate to those of contemporary movements for racial justice. When our group decided to focus our interpretive piece on The Alley, we approached these topics not in order to ascertain all of the facts about The Alley's different manifestations—a worthy goal, but beyond our scope—but in order to gather and tell what stories we could in the spirit of intergenerational sharing and bread-breaking.

ABOUT THE ALLEY

Our team first learned about The Alley in May, from reading drafts of the exhibition catalog essays and speaking with Patric McCoy during an event at the Smart Museum (a recording of this conversation is Track 1 on Side A). The Alley intrigued us in part because many members of our group are artists who personally understand the importance of having spaces on the South Side where creators and arts appreciators can gather, exchange ideas, be themselves, and be in community.

As our group began to research The Alley, we learned that there was not just one Alley, in one place and time. Rather, there were multiple manifestations, sometimes happening concurrently, each with its own artistic and ideological complexity. The people we spoke with, through formal interviews or informal conversations, shared views that did not always align with each other's. We approached these differences as insights into the rich mosaic of Black Chicago's cultural history. For many of those we talked to, The Alley seemed to symbolize community, though what that meant differed across years, locations, and the lenses of individual lives. For some, The Alley was a safe haven; for others, a reflection of tragedies and triumphs unfolding on the South Side. Still, they all agreed that a considerable crowd gathered every Sunday at Arthur "Pops" Simpson's garage and the adjacent alley just off 50th Street between Champlain and St. Lawrence to listen to DJs spin jazz records, beginning in the 1950s. Jazz in The Alley evolved to include a live music set once a month, led by musician Jimmy Ellis, inspiring artistic creation in many forms. Mitchell Caton created murals on the alley walls with contributions from Dr. C. Siddha Webber, as well as Jimmy Ellis, Robert Sengstacke, and others. Poets performed, and photographers depicted the scene and made portraits of the patrons—an intergenerational crowd from varying walks of life. As interviewees describe, the city government shut down The Alley, forcing it to relocate after almost 30 years of operating in the original alley just north of Washington Park. Uncowed, the gathering tradition continued elsewhere on the South Side, through various iterations, and still continues today through such forms as the Universal Alley Jazz Jam at 71st and Constance and, in summer 2018, Back Alley Jazz.

ABOUT THE PROCESS

To draw forth some of The Alley's many histories, our group invited several visual artists, musicians, and others who had deep connections to The Alley to speak with us about their experience. Some we identified from our research and others were recommended to us by Dr. Rebecca Zorach, curator of *The Time Is Now!*, or by other interviewees as we went along. Our group members researched each interview subject in preparation for our conversation, but also wanted to be open to the unexpected and to invite perspectives and recollections that had not been thoroughly documented before.

Initially, our group considered making a "mix tape" that would collage several viewpoints on The Alley and its various manifestations. We decided to ultimately present our content on vinyl, both to invoke The Alley's origins as a place where people listened collectively as DJs spun records and to add present voices to the conversation in a format that was more prominent throughout that time. Our interviewing process resulted in more than nine hours of audio, many times more than what we could fit on the album. We were also honored to include audio clips that we excerpted from Dr. Zorach's interviews with the late Dr. C. Siddha Webber. (The Scholars' full interviews will be archived by the Smart Museum and available by request. Dr. Zorach's conversations with Dr. Webber are archived online at www.never-the-same.org.)

As we worked, our group chose to focus our album on these main topics: The Alley's origins, its music, the people who congregated there and gave it life, its murals, its relocations, and how The Alley's story speaks to ongoing issues concerning the spatial politics of race and class on the South Side. We sought to render these themes in a manner that presented a narrative arc while enabling the voices and views of each individual we interviewed to shine through. Even with these focus areas and considerations, we had to make many difficult cuts. Our project does not provide comprehensive documentation or reflection on The Alley, its legacies, and the many things it meant to those who participated in it. Particularly on our project's time frame of less than two months, and on a 40-minute record, we were only able to engage with a small fraction of those diverse and important perspectives. We hope that this album serves as a point of inquiry and an invitation to learn more.

For more information about The Alley, see the contributor essays, as well as reproduced works by Mikki Ferrill, Kevin Harris, and Daniel "Sandman" Pope, in the exhibition catalog. See also "Portrait of a Chicago Community 1966-1976," a collection of photographs by Kevin Harris and Jimmy Ellis (available online through the Museum of Public Art), and "Jazz

Alley, 50th and Langley, Chicago," photographs by Jonas Dovyendas, collected by Ralph Metcalfe, Jr. (available in the Chicago Ethnic Arts Project archives on the Library of Congress website). In addition to listening to and learning from our album, we encourage you to support The Alley's continuing iterations.

ABOUT THE ALBUM

We produced *The Alley LP: Perspectives & Recollections* as part of a limited run, with each interviewee receiving a copy of the album.

The record jacket was designed by Sandra Swift, one of the Scholars, using images that speak to the ethos of The Alley. The tiled image on the front cover is a painting by Marcus Sterling Alleyne, created from a live sketch drawn during a 2015 Universal Alley Jazz Jam event. The inset photograph—a still from Kevin Harris' 1976 short film, *Jazz in The Alley* (available on YouTube)—depicts Diane Ellis, a noted musician and music educator, playing saxophone inside the Garage. The image on the reverse of the jacket is a photograph by Georg Stahl, of a crown made by Daniel Pope, known as the Sandman, who frequented and was known to wear such crowns to The Alley.

The Alley LP was featured at a listening station in the gallery during the run of the exhibition *The Time is Now!* The other records at that station were selected by the Scholars, with facilitators' and interviewees' guidance, to give visitors an experience of a selection of jazz music similar to the range of what was played at and shaped the culture of The Alley in its early years. These include examples of what interviewees described to us as "straight-ahead jazz"—meaning jazz rooted in the blues, bop, and swing—and of experimental and free jazz. We have been told that the latter were generally not played at The Alley, but that many of the musicians who frequented The Alley belonged to experimental Chicago collectives that arose during the Black Arts Movement, such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

We invite you to explore the art in the exhibition catalog while listening to *The Alley LP: Perspectives & Recollections*.

– *Written by Kai Parker and Marya Spont-Lemus, with contributions by Devell Jordan, Jeanne Lieberman, and Ariana Strong*

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- Our many supporters at the Sojourner Scholars Program and Smart Museum of Art, especially Dr. Rebecca Zorach, Michael Christiano, Audrey Petty, Jason Pallas, Jacqueline Finley, and Dorian H. Nash.
- Our interviewees, who were so enthusiastic and generous in sharing their experiences with us through these conversations: Marcus Sterling Alleyne, Maggie Brown, Jimmy Ellis, Douglas Ewart, Kevin Harris, Patric McCoy, Tyler Mitchell, Cécile Savage, Georg Stahl, and Karma S. Webber.
- The guest speakers and others who helped us along in our thinking, especially Mikki Ferrill, Tempestt Hazel, Zakkiyyah Najeebah, Norman Teague, and Fo Wilson.
- Maggie Brown and Douglas Ewart, for lending records from their own collections for use at special public listening parties.
- And, of course, the countless artists, musicians, and community members who made—and continue to make—the many iterations and vibrations of *The Alley* possible.

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ABOUT THE SCHOLARS

This project's primary creators are all graduates of Harlan High School (Class of 2017), alumni of the Sojourner Scholars Program, and docents at the Smart Museum of Art.

My name is **Nyla Evans Conway**. I am enrolling in school in September, to help me get my dream job: To be my own BOSS. Ten years from now I plan to own my own restaurant or bakery. And last but not least, I am a proud mother to Jesse Medley, Jr. I want to be able to spoil my baby.

Hello! My name is **Devell Jordan** and I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. I'm a music fanatic, and it helps me move forward. Also, I enjoy challenges, because I feel that they can help me prepare to step over roadblocks that could otherwise affect me in the future. I currently attend Saint Xavier University. I intend to become an expert in music theory and to develop software that can make life easier for generations to come.

My name is **Ariana Strong**. I am going into my sophomore year at Harold Washington College to obtain my Associates Degree in Information Technology. I have a passion for reading and I try to read every day if I can, mostly on online platforms.

Hey! I'm **Sandra Swift** and I'm a lover of arts and sciences. I am studying neurobiology and am also a poet, or so they tell me. I'm an organizer fighting for my people, and I am a proud member of the LGBT+ community. I'm a Southside rep and I love Chicago like it's my mom. But I love her more!