James Baldwin Playboy Interview, 1967-1968: Finding Aid

Summary Information

Call number: C1557
Repository: Princeton University. Library. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections
Manuscripts Division
One Washington Road Princeton, New Jersey 08544 USA
Size: 0.4 linear feet
2 boxes
Language(s) of Material: English
Abstract: Consists of sound recordings, a transcription, and editorial notes documenting an interview of American writer James Baldwin conducted by Alex Haley (1921-1992) and Jim Goode (James A. Goode, d. 1992) in late 1967 and early 1968 for Playboy but never published in the magazine. The interview is conversational and wide-ranging, with Baldwin responding to questions about his personal and artistic life, as well as about larger social issues surrounding racism, sexuality, politics, economics, and activism.
Location: Materials are stored onsite at Firestone Library with the exception of original audiotapes (Box 2), which are stored offsite at the ReCAP facility.
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James Baldwin (1924-1987) was an American novelist, essayist, playwright, short story writer, and poet whose focus on issues of racial discrimination made him a prominent spokesperson for racial equality, especially during the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Baldwin grew up in Harlem and had a troubled relationship with his strict, religious stepfather. As a teenager, he became a preacher at a small church in Harlem. After graduating from DeWitt Clinton High School in 1942, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village and began publishing essays and short stories in national periodicals. Disillusioned with racism and homophobia in the United States, Baldwin left for his first extended stay in Paris, France, in 1948. He would go on to spend much of his life abroad living in Paris and later Saint-Paul de Vence, France, as well as in Turkey and Switzerland.

Baldwin published his first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain, in 1953, which was followed shortly thereafter by a play The Amen Corner (1954) and a collection of essays Notes of a Native Son (1955). Many of Baldwin's novels, including Giovanni's Room (1956), Another Country (1962), and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968) engage the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, particularly in the lives of African Americans and gay and bisexual men. His novels, plays, and essays explore the psychological effects of racism for both black and white Americans and reflect on the social upheaval of the civil rights era. Beginning in the early 1960s, especially following the publication of his best-selling book The Fire Next Time (1963), Baldwin became increasingly involved in social and political activism, using his platform as a literary celebrity to give lecture tours and interviews on race relations in the United States. Baldwin continued to write prolifically until his death in 1987 in France, where he was named Commander of the Legion of Honor in 1986.

Consists of sound recordings, a transcription, and editorial notes documenting multiple sessions of an interview of American writer James Baldwin conducted by Alex Haley (1921-1992) and Jim Goode (James A. Goode, d. 1992) in late 1967 and early 1968 for Playboy but never published in the magazine. At the time, Alex Haley was an interviewer and journalist for the magazine’s monthly Playboy Interview feature, and Jim Goode was an articles editor. The interview is conversational and wide-ranging, with Baldwin responding to questions about his personal and artistic life, as well as about larger social issues surrounding racism, sexuality, politics, economics, and activism.

The earlier interview session conducted by Jim Goode, circa September 1967, is documented by a 170-page typescript transcription, with some handwritten corrections. Notations indicate that the transcription was made from four tapes, but the original sound recordings for this session are not included in the collection. In January 1968, Playboy editor Murray Fisher sent the transcription to Alex Haley for review, as indicated by a memo from his assistant. Sound recordings of later interview sessions conducted by Alex Haley, circa October 1967 through March 1968, are present on two open reel audiotapes, which have been digitized; these total three and a half hours in length. There are also four heavily annotated lists of questions for Baldwin drafted by several Playboy editors and journalists.

In the interview, Baldwin discusses his childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood extensively, reflecting on his family and upbringing; his experience with religion and preaching; his schooling, early
jobs, and friendships; as well as his later expatriatism in France (particularly so in the session with Jim Goode). Baldwin also speaks candidly about his sexuality in the context of his early relationships with both men and women, as well as physical threats he experienced due to both his sexual orientation and race. He also provides thoughts and critiques about African American civil rights and human rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Medgar Evers; activist organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE); and politicians such as John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, and Ronald Reagan. He also describes events including the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP), which took place in Chicago in August-September 1967, and his meeting with Robert F. Kennedy on May 24, 1963.

Throughout the interview, Baldwin addresses legacies of racism and white supremacy in the United States and abroad, touching on the history of colonialism, genocide against Native Americans, and slavery, as well as contemporary power structures, opposition to which he describes as a type of "guerilla warfare." Other topics of conversation include the Vietnam War, FBI surveillance of black activists in the South, police violence and urban riots in New York, Chicago, and Detroit, the 1960s counterculture and student activist movements, white middle class liberalism, possibilities for an American socialism, the influence of money in politics, and the relationship between literature and politics.

Access and Use

Access
Open for research.

Access to digitized sound recordings is available in the RBSC reading room. For preservation reasons, physical access to original tapes is restricted.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. No further photoduplication of copies of material in the collection can be made when Princeton University Library does not own the original. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Associate University Librarian for Rare Books and Special Collections. Researchers are responsible for determining any questions of copyright.

Acquisition and Appraisal

Custodial History
From the estate of Alex Haley.

Provenance and Acquisition
Purchase, 2017 (AM 2017-113).

Appraisal
No materials were separated during 2017 processing.
Preferred Citation
Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Title of Collection, Box and Folder Number; Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Encoding
This finding aid was produced using the Archivists' Toolkit 2017-11-30T15:09-0500

Descriptive Rules Used
Finding aid content adheres to that prescribed by Describing Archives: A Content Standard.

Subject Headings

- Baldwin, James, 1924-1987
- Goode, James
- Haley, Alex, 1921-1992
- Playboy Enterprises
- African Americans -- Civil rights -- History -- 20th century -- Interviews.
- African American authors -- 20th century -- Interviews.
- Authors, American -- 20th century -- Interviews.
- Civil rights movements -- United States -- History -- 20th century.
- United States -- Race relations -- 20th century.
- Interviews -- 20th century.
- Sound recordings -- 20th century.
- Typescripts -- 20th century.
- American history/20th century
- American literature
- Black history
- Literature
Contents List

Interview with Jim Goode, circa 1967 September
  Description: Consists of a typescript transcription.

Interview with Alex Haley, circa 1967 October-1968 March
  Description: Consists of sound recordings, totaling 3 hours and 38 minutes in length. These recordings were originally stored on two 1/4-inch open reel audiotapes on 3” reels, labeled "A" and "B," which have been digitized.

Interview Question Lists, circa 1967 September-1968 March

Memo to Alex Haley, 1968 January 9
  Description: Memo from Juli Bainbridge on behalf of Murray Fisher regarding the Jim Goode interview transcription.

Envelopes, 1968 April 1
  Description: Consists of empty envelopes, including a mailing envelope addressed to Alex Haley.