Finding aid to the Sonny Nelson Papers SFH 781956-2009

Finding aid prepared by Jordon Zorker
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2014
Title: Sonny Nelson Papers
Date (inclusive): 1956 - 2009
Collection Identifier: SFH 78
Creator: Nelson, Sonny, 1928 - 2009
Physical Description: 1 box(0.5 linear feet)
Contributing Institution: San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

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Abstract: Newspaper clippings, photos, magazines, writings, correspondence, ephemera, and audio recordings documenting the work and interests of jazz musician and night club owner Sonny Nelson. Much of the collection is about the San Francisco North Beach night club the Cellar (aka the Jazz Cellar; active about 1956 - 1960), a birthplace of jazz poetry. A lesser portion of the collection covers Nelson's second North Beach jazz club, the Boule Noire (active about 1960 - 1963).

Physical Location: The collection is stored onsite.
Language of Materials: Collection materials are in English.

Processing Information
Processed by Jordon Zorker (intern), 2014.

Access
The collection is available for use during San Francisco History Center hours, with photographs available during Photo Desk hours. Collections that are stored offsite should be requested 48 hours in advance. Audio-recordings are being reformatted and are currently unavailable for use.

Publication Rights
All requests for permission to publish or quote from manuscripts must be submitted in writing to the City Archivist. Permission for publication is given on behalf of the San Francisco Public Library as the owner of the physical items.

Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], Sonny Nelson Papers (SFH 78), San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library.

Provenance
The collection was a gift from the Nelson family, in several accessions, in 2010 and 2012.

Biographical/Historical
Sonny Nelson (Jan. 6, 1928 - Sept. 24, 2009), born Wayne E. Nelson, was a multi-instrumental jazz musician (primarily drums) and part-owner of two jazz clubs in San Francisco’s North Beach district, the Cellar (1956 - 1960) and the Boule Noire (1960 - 1963), which saw a fusion of jazz and poetry performance during the Beat era. His early life appears to have been spent in the Minnesota Twin Cities area and he passed away in Los Angeles. Sonny assisted with the club operations of the Cellar and shared duties of being the drummer of its house band, the “cellar jazz quartet,” featured on the LP by poets Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Poetry Readings in the Cellar" (Fantasy Records 7002, 1957), where he is credited as “Sonny Wayne – Drums.” Sonny travelled throughout the U.S. as a musician and there are references in the collection to his having lived in Minneapolis, Chicago, San Francisco, New Orleans, and finally Los Angeles at the end of his life. His friends included jazz poet Ruth Weiss and poet Rod McKuen. An undated resume for Sonny Nelson in Venice, CA, lists work in feature films, television programs, and commercials, as well as minor film roles.

Scope and Contents
Newspaper clippings, photos, magazines, writings, correspondence, ephemera, and audio recordings documenting the work and interests of jazz musician and night club owner Sonny Nelson. Much of the collection is about the San Francisco North Beach night club the Cellar (aka the Jazz Cellar; active about 1956 - 1960), a birthplace of jazz poetry. A lesser portion of the collection covers Nelson's second North Beach jazz club, the Boule Noire (active about 1960 - 1963). Highlights of the collection include: interior and exterior images of the Cellar and lists of famous persons who performed or attended there; typescripts by Nelson about the Cellar: description of the club, additional San Francisco jazz clubs, list of musicians who visited the Cellar, descriptions of famous jazz musicians Nelson met, remembrances titled "This Happened at the Cellar," musicians who “sat-in,” background of Nelson, poets at the Cellar, the Jazz Cellar and the cops, the Army, and comments on jazz; letters and audio recordings from jazz poet Ruth Weiss; greeting cards from poet Rod McKuen, and others. Most of the...
newspaper clippings are reviews of general jazz from later decades, with a few clippings from the period of the Cellar. Ephemera includes business cards, matchbooks with nightclub logos. The collection also includes two San Francisco magazines (1985 and 1991) with cover stories of local jazz history by Herbert Gold and Jack Lind.

**Subjects and Indexing Terms**

Beat poetry.


Jazz--Poetry.

Nightclubs--California--San Francisco--History.

North Beach (San Francisco, Calif.)--History.

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Box 1, Folder 1  The Cellar scrapbook 1956-2009
Box 1, Folder 2  Photographs 1956-2009
  - The bandstand inside The Cellar nightclub at 576 Green St., [between 1957 and 1960]
  - The bar inside The Cellar nightclub at 576 Green St., [between 1957 and 1960]
  - Jazz trio at the Boule Noire, 238 Columbus Ave., 1960 Sept.
  - Sonny Nelson, owner of The Cellar, with Cellar poster, [between 1978 and 1988]
  - Waitresses at the Boule Noire, 238 Columbus Ave. graphic, 1960 Sept.
  - Sonny Nelson, owner in front of the Boule Noire, 238 Columbus Ave., 1960 July

Box 1, Folder 3  Writings 1956-2009
Box 1, Folder 4  Correspondence 1960-1986
Box 1, Folder 5  Articles 1960-2005
Box 1, Folder 6  Clippings 1960-2008
Box 1, Folder 7  Ephemera 1956-2009
Box 1, Folder 8  Ruth Weiss 1957-2009