Guide to the John K. Martin Collection, ca. 1952-1966

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Collection number: Mss 145

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Descriptive Summary
Title: John K. Martin Collection,
Date (inclusive): ca. 1952-1966
Collection number: Mss 145
Creator: Martin, John K.
Extent: 1 linear foot (3 boxes).
Repository: University of California, Santa Barbara. Library. Dept. of Special Collections
Santa Barbara, CA 93106
Shelf location: For current information on the location of these materials, please consult the library's online catalog.
Language: English.
Provenance
Mainly purchase from John K. Martin, ca. 1966.
Restrictions
None.
Preferred Citation
[Identification of item], John K. Martin Collection, Mss 145, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Biography
John K. Martin is the owner of Black Sparrow Press, which was located in Los Angeles, then Santa Barbara and, more recently, in Santa Rosa, California. He is best known as the publisher of Charles Bukowski’s work, but he also has published the work of other authors such as Paul and Jane Bowles, David Bromige, Tom Clark, Wanda Coleman, Cid Corman, Robert Creeley, Fielding Dawson, Larry Eigner, Clayton Eshleman, William Everson, John Fante, Paul Goodman, Robert Kelly, Wyndham Lewis, Joyce Carol Oates, Charles Olson, John B. Sanford, Gertrude Stein, and Diane Wakoski.
Martin was born in 1930 in San Francisco, California. He grew up in Los Angeles and it was there that he developed his interests in literature as a teenager. He dropped out of the University of California in Los Angeles during his first year because his favorite modern authors, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence and Wallace Stevens, among others, were not then being taught. He went to work in an office supply store where he eventually became the manager. At the supply store, with access to printing machinery, he issued early broadsides of the poetry of Charles Bukowski, whose career was to become so entwined with that of Martin. He gave these broadsides away to the employees of the supply store. His hobby of collecting first editions of the modern masters had begun earlier.

In 1949 at the age of nineteen, Martin began his collection of American and English literature. It grew haphazardly at first, reflecting his own changing reading interests. Early on, Martin's collecting efforts centered on authors such as Faulkner, Lawrence, Pound, and Henry Miller. Later he began to focus on works by the "new poets" and in particular on what came to be known as "beat poetry". This interest in the non-commercial and the eclectic was to remain an important element in his collecting and, later, publishing careers.

Martin met and befriended many of the writers affiliated with the new movements in American poetry and prose of the 1950s and was thereby able to obtain their scarce early publications directly. According to Martin, it would now be impossible to duplicate the acquisition of many of these works at any price. Martin was always interested in obtaining the best copy of any given work and often turned a copy over several times in order to acquire an even better version, even if it was just a matter of "getting the dust wrapper." The collection of material by and related to Henry Miller is a case in point. During the 1950s Martin established a relationship with Miller wherein the author assisted him in the acquisition of various editions of his then frequently banned books. Martin in return helped Miller in tasks ranging from distribution of Miller's works to acquiring for him items as varied as rare editions to artist's supplies and books for Miller's daughter. These he brought or sent to Miller in Big Sur.

In 1966 Martin launched Black Sparrow Press. He was able to do so with the proceeds from the sale of his collection of first and signed editions the previous year to UCSB. His personal relationships with some of the authors whom he collected remained an important factor in his early publishing efforts. Martin has noted that the good poetry that he read was never published and that the poetry that was published was rarely good. One of the poets whose work he had been following via the underground press was Charles Bukowski. Bukowski, while still working full-time at the Post Office, was attempting to eke out a career as a writer. Bukowski's work chronicled the hard-luck underbelly of life in Los Angeles and it had found a small but enthusiastic audience. Black Sparrow's first publication was a limited edition of Bukowski's poem True Story, followed by three others.

In 1969 Martin made Bukowski an unusual offer: He would give him $100 per month for life, no strings attached, if the writer would quit his day job. As Bukowski remembered it: "He had published some of my poems as broadsides. He wrote me out checks as I sat in my kitchen across from him, drinking beer and signing the broadsides. It was the beginning of Black Sparrow Press, a house that was soon to begin publishing a large portion of America's avant-garde poetry, but neither of us knew it then." The freedom that this small sum gave Bukowski permitted him to finish the novel Post Office in 1971. Although only a modest success financially, the novel helped to establish a word-of-mouth reputation for the fledgling press that allowed it and Martin to prevail during what had been a very lean financial period. Martin was able to maintain the independent status that he cherished and Bukowski's fame began to grow.

Martin not only promoted Bukowski, but on occasion defended him as well. In the 1970s during a reading at a Santa Barbara nightclub, Bukowski was being heckled by a patron who expected a more unrestrained, less subtle "exhibition." Martin, who was in attendance, leapt up to challenge the offender as Bukowski continued his reading, which was increasingly filled with invective towards his audience. A bouncer eventually led the heckler away.

In 1975, Black Sparrow moved from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara. The press continued to grow as its author list and sales expanded. During its decade in Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow was instrumental in reviving the place of the small press and the rare book dealer in the community. Black Sparrow also grew from an operation that was based in Martin's home, where he and his wife Barbara performed all aspects of publishing, sales, and distribution, to a larger scale facility in Santa Rosa where Martin relocated in 1985. There are now full-time employees, links to national distribution companies for Black Sparrow titles and an ever growing, but still decidedly eclectic list of authors. Black Sparrow has continued to flourish despite its resolute emphasis on non-traditional, non-mainstream writers, many with roots in the avant garde movements of the fifties and sixties. Yet Martin remains committed both to promoting new voices and to rescuing from obscurity others whose work has fallen by the literary wayside. Just two examples of the latter category are Wyndham Lewis and John Fante. Lewis was an English painter and critic prominent from 1915 to 1950. Martin has reissued twenty-one of his works including Men without Art wherein Lewis mercilessly critiques authors such as Pound and Hemingway. Fante wrote extensively about the Italian immigrant experience in Los Angeles in a number of novels written in the thirties and forties. It was Bukowski who recommended Fante to Martin, who has reissued a number of his works including a collection of correspondence between Fante and his mentor, H. L. Mencken.
Martin prefers to manage his business from behind the scenes. Somewhat in contrast to his earlier career, he now meets few of his writers more than once, choosing to "keep [his] attention on their work, rather than on their personalities." [In the words of one observer] he seeks to publish only those books which can awaken and disturb, to promote those writers whose works rub against the world and keep rubbing till that friction produces sparks.

Much of the material for this biographical sketch was drawn from:


**Title:** Charles Bukowski Collection  
**Identifier/Call Number:** (Mss 12).

**Title:** Philip Peatman/Henry Miller Collection  
**Identifier/Call Number:** (Mss 29)

Related printed materials and other Black Sparrow Press materials are cataloged in Pegasus, the UCSB online catalog.

**At other repositories**

Additional John Martin Papers (Collection 1267) are located at UCLA, Young Research Library, Department of Special Collections.

Black Sparrow Press records are located in several repositories:
- ca. 1967-1974, at Pennsylvania State University, University Libraries, Rare Books Room.
- ca. 1971-1993, at the University of Arizona, University Libraries, Special Collections.
- 1993-ongoing, at the University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

**Author Files**

**Scope and Content Note**

With material relating to Robert Duncan, Henry Miller, and Tennessee Williams. There also is correspondence to John Martin from Ted Berrigan, Frank O'Connor, Miriam Patchen, Jon Webb, and Emil White (friend of Henry Miller's at Big Sur). Manuscript material relating to Charles Bukowski, including correspondence and poems, is located in the Charles Bukowski Collection (Mss 12).

**Catalogue of Printed Materials**

**Scope and Content Note**

Arrangement

In four binders, arranged alphabetically by surname of author.

These manuscript materials are part of a much larger collection consisting mainly of books which have been cataloged separately and which can be searched on Pegasus, the UCSB University Libraries online catalog. The books are predominantly first editions, in two categories: British and American fictional and dramatic writers, and contemporary poetry (almost solely American). Included are several hundred presentation items from the authors to John Martin.

**Series 1 Author Files**

**Box 1, Folder 1**  
**Duncan, Robert Edward**

**Scope and Content Note**

(correspondence, photo, and drawings), 6 items, 1966)
Box 1, Folder 2

Miller, Eve
Scope and Content Note
(wife of Henry Miller; correspondence), 17 items, 1952-1957

Miller, Henry
Correspondence and related items
Box 1, Folder 3
Apr.-Dec. 1952, 14 items
Box 1, Folder 4
Feb. 1953 - Dec. 1955, 23 items
Box 1, Folder 5
May 1956 - Mar. 1960, 37 items
Box 1, Folder 6
Henry Miller on Really the Blues
Scope and Content Note
(copy of typescript letter)

Series 2 Miscellany

Box 1, Folder 7
Incoming Correspondence
Scope and Content Note
(includes Ted Berrigan, the Henry Miller Literary Society, Frank O'Connor, Miriam Patchen, Jon Webb, and Emil White (friend of Henry Miller's at Big Sur), 39 items, 1953-1966

Box 1, Folder 8
Printed Material
Scope and Content Note
(includes clippings, publishers' lists and prospectuses, relating to William Everson, Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen, and others), ca. 1960-1966

Williams, Tennessee - Mimeographed rehearsal scripts
Box 2, Folder 1
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore
Scope and Content Note
(An actor's mimeographed rehearsal script (Script #7). This version of the play is unpublished and differs drastically from the final version published by New Directions in 1964. When the original Broadway production failed early in 1963 after 69 performances, Williams entirely rewrote the play and opened this version in Abingdon, Virginia, on Sept. 17, 1963. This copy of the script belonged to Nancy Wilder, wife of producer Billy Wilder, who portrayed Blackie in this road company. The script itself is an actor's working copy with at least half of the 96 pages containing pencilled corrections, deletions, improvised stage directions; in two places hastily typed insertions replace scribbled-out pages. When pencilled, these holograph changes are in the hand of actress Nancy Wilder. In a few places the director, Adrian Hall, has deleted speeches with a fountain pen. Many of the pages are criss-crossed, revised and written over to the point of illegibility. This show closed shortly after Sept. 17. Afterwards, Williams completely rewrote it for a third time and took it to New York where it failed again. Laid in is a review from the New York Times, dated Sept. 18, 1963)

Box 2, Folder 2
The Night of the Iguana
Scope and Content Note
(Mimeographed rehearsal copy of the Broadway production script, preceding all published versions. New Directions published the play in 1962. This copy is inscribed by Tennessee Williams to John Martin)
Box 2, Folder 3  **Orpheus Descending**

Scope and Content Note

(An early unpublished working version, mimeographed, of the Broadway script. It bears little resemblance to the original version published in 1945 *Battle of Angels*. It differs just as profoundly from the version published in 1958 by New Directions as *Orpheus Descending*, and the final revised version published in 1959 by Dramatists Play Service. This version apparently is the original uncut working version as drafted Williams, prior to rehearsals for the Broadway production. Much of the dialogue herein was drastically revised and entire scenes were destined to disappear, with new scenes written before either of the New York versions were published.*

Box 3, Folder 1-4  **Catalogue of Printed Materials in the Martin Collection**

Scope and Content Note

(in four binders, arranged alphabetically by surname of author)