

For Your Enrichment

Barry Trott, Col. Ed.

Exploring New York City's Shelves

The Musings of the Informed Library Patron

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For Your Enrichment is an occasional column that offers a platform for pieces that are of relevance to the work of librarians but that might not otherwise fit in one of the traditional RUSQ column areas. When I was approached about this piece, I was intrigued by the opportunity to share the perspective of a library user on the work that we do to support research and assist those new to using libraries. It is a view we rarely hear about.— Editor

I am not a librarian. I'm not a library expert or even a library student. I am a library patron. I don't have either a formal education in information science or even an experiential understanding of how libraries operate. Throughout my life, I would go to libraries to learn, yet I never gave a second thought to finding out more about how these very spaces I was in continued to exist. That is, until recently, when a research project of personal interest changed my perception entirely. I have set out to document my experience and what I have learned, hoping that it would give library staff a patron's perspective on their work and the vast resources housed in libraries. I also hoped that it could give my fellow library patrons a glimpse of what they can expect to find in these spaces. Most importantly, I hope it will be a *thank you* to everyone who keeps the libraries running.

Uninformed

Stained glass, wooden tables lit warmly by nearby lamps, and the click-clack of groups of students eagerly typing away—only the average weeknight at the Vassar College library. On any given Monday through Thursday, weekends included during finals season, this place served as the push to finally try that brainstorming session that had proved altogether frustrating, or grit out that paper that you had been putting off. My graduation from Vassar owes a lot to this space, where I completed so many assignments that would have been impossible in a cramped dorm room or a crowded and noisy cafeteria.

A few years removed from school, my desire to learn and write still leaves me with questions. And while having a 9-to-5 job does make that a bit more difficult than a 10:30-to-11:45 class, if college leaves you with anything, it is an expanded idea of what subjects are out there to discover and become engrossed in. I was always interested in music but wanted to explore its more atypical, overlooked forms and their history.

Enter Cabaret.

And so, I did what everyone does when they want to gain more knowledge about something: Googled it and went to the first link—*Wikipedia*. As I clicked through more and more pages, I became further invested in this topic as something to pursue for research purposes. Eventually, I landed on examining the performances of one cabaret artist, Judith Ren-Lay.¹ I wanted to study someone local and recent, whose work would be relatively accessible to me. Now retired, Ren-Lay was a New York-based cabaret artist and singer, with most of her concerts recorded in the 1980s, which provided the perfect subject for my interests.

I have now successfully found an artist to focus all of my research energy on. However, looking back, I wondered: Was I too late to the party? Would I be able to feasibly and thoroughly complete this project given the learning resources available to me?

Through four years of college, I entirely underutilized our academic library. Vassar College's Thompson Memorial Library provided students with an excellent opportunity to dive into subjects of their choosing. Emphasis on *opportunity*. While I absolutely loved the space as one where hours of studying could be accomplished with relative ease compared to other numerous, distraction-filled spaces on campus, I rarely took the time to explore the shelves that surrounded me as I worked, let alone its massive "virtual" shelves.

In all honesty, I saw the library as a workspace, a big coffee shop minus the drinks and snacks. I say this not because I am proud of this standpoint, but because I regret this view and hope that no one else adopts it. After my four years were finished, I found myself without this space for the first time as a fully formed adult. While this in itself was alarming, I would slowly come to learn all the various ways in which I benefited from the library, physical or otherwise, that had largely gone over my head. So many books, journals, reference sources, and archival collections were provided for me simply by attending my school. I had previously accessed these resources with such ease that I got used to taking them completely for granted, much like the physical space of the library. Now, these online resources remained locked behind paywalls; the building was an hour-and-a-half drive away; and it seemed to me that my ability to research had vanished. Unlike in many other aspects, which made me feel that I did truly get the most out of college, I was disappointed that I had not tried to use my library more often.

Adjusting My Sights

Six months after I graduated from college, I moved out of my house in the suburbs and into New York. This would give me a way to be closer to work and friends and to be in a place where getting around was car-free and easy. However, I had not accounted for one of the best parts about moving into New York—and what would serve as the solution to my worries—The New York Public Library. While it may have been an aspect that I had grossly underestimated, in due time, it would grow to become a staple of my experience living here.

There are dozens of NYPL locations across the city, each neighborhood having its own branch and programming catered to the local needs. I knew that first-hand through my job's affiliation with the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL). Here I was, a resident of New York who worked directly with library projects and programming. Clearly, I would seem like someone who understood the potential that libraries held. And yet, months into my move, I was again running the risk of severely underutilizing an excellent resource freely available to me at (most) times of the week. With multiple branches within a fifteen-minute walk of both my new apartment and my work, my solution was staring me

in the face, quite literally, on a daily basis. I could absolutely use the library as my post-Vassar resource. Finally, on a sunny day in May, I decided to take the trip to one of the branches, the Library for the Performing Arts, to see what exactly I may have been missing out on. If there is one thing I have learned, it is not to underestimate a library.

Smarter

On that day, it took me a few turns to find it, but eventually I did arrive at my library. As I decided to peer up, rather than down at my phone for a change, I saw the two parallel red banners that read “NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY.” This time, before I left the house, I actually did some planning and explored what resources this space had to offer—a small but time-saving task that I never did at Vassar. As I looked through newspaper archives, music journals, or other video recordings available on-site, I was reminded of the fun in writing, specifically, in the simple pleasures of finding a source that perfectly covers the topic you had been looking for. Not since my college thesis had I tried to do a project of this magnitude, only this time, within the constraints that I had set for myself. It became evident with time that the NYPL encouraged its patrons to explore in this independent, personalized way.

According to the NYPL Online Archives, this was the place where I would be able to access information about Judith Ren-Lay.² As I honed my search further and further, I was able to pinpoint various works that would be useful in my project and where I could access them. Some were journal articles regarding the history of the genre of cabaret available to me through online databases like JSTOR or Taylor & Francis. Some were magazine reviews that I could access on-site in the physical collections of music publications sorted by year. What was particularly intriguing, however, was the availability and ease with which I could also view the video recordings of Ren-Lay’s live performances. Of course, the goal in original research is to utilize primary sources as much as possible, and through the NYPL, these were readily available. Due to her locality, much of Ren-Lay’s work is freely viewable at the NYPL, mostly at the Library for the Performing Arts.

As I walked in, I first saw a staff member in charge of bag check, sitting in front of groups of tables. This branch, one of the biggest in the system, boasted four floors, each with different specializations. In order to view the video recordings that I had highlighted prior to coming here, I needed to get to the Dance and Recorded Sound Division on the third floor. As I walked up the stairs and turned into the division, I saw a sea of forty or so older, bulky 2010s-era PC desktops behind the walls of glass and signage alerting me to drop off my bag. No bags in the recorded sound division and no water bottles either. Now, armed with just my laptop, I entered this new space.

This floor was organized in such a way that library staff sat at the front of a large room, at a big circular desk where they could interact with a few patrons at



Figure 1. New York Library for the Performing Arts

once. Adjacent to the desk, there were the rows of desktop computers, and I walked up to the staff at the front desk to begin the process of research. Because I had already done my preplanning and created my NYPL Special Collections account, all I had to do was merge this account with my newly minted NYPL card, and I was set to go. The library team members assisted me throughout this entire procedure. It was particularly heartwarming to see the staff so devoted to helping a “customer” at a “business” driven by curiosity, not profit.

Each step in this process, from entering the floor to viewing the resource, seemed particularly routinized and specialized to each staff member. First, the person at the front desk would check your card and ensure that you were eligible to view resources from the NYPL. The front desk staff let me know that the process of locating and viewing these recordings was quite simple now: provide the call number of the video I wished to view, and they would check their in-house computer databases to ensure that it was available at the location. According to library staff, these recordings existed in DVD format in archival rooms devoted solely to keeping video resources, and locating a recording for a patron was as easy as a simple search on a computer.

After it was ensured that the recording was available, the person at the front desk would notify the video technician in the archival room to set it up. I was then walked to my desk at the very back of the rows of desktops and told that once the technician had set it up, I was ready to begin viewing. In the case of looking at a book or other written resource, I would fill out a paper slip with the call number, title, and year of the resource I wanted to check out and hand it to a different staff member, who sat to the side of the front desk and specialized in locating print resources.

Researching in a Library... Again

After confirming that my video recording—a live performance in multiple acts by Judith Ren-Lay called “Cassandra’s Quilt”—was, in fact, available to be viewed, I was directed to one of the desktops. Each desktop setup was equipped with two monitors, one set of headphones, and a device to control volume. The library attendant informed me that in a few minutes, one of the monitors would begin playing my requested video, with the other serving as a command center through which I could pause, fast forward, or communicate with the video’s technician from the archival room. When I pressed for more information about this process, the staff explained that each video recording was stored in a large archival room downstairs, and most of them were in DVD format. The process of finding a recording by call number used to be done physically by a staff member looking through the systematically organized stacks in order to find the desired recording. Nowadays, however, staff joked, it was doubtful if current employees were even aware of what this collection organization system was.

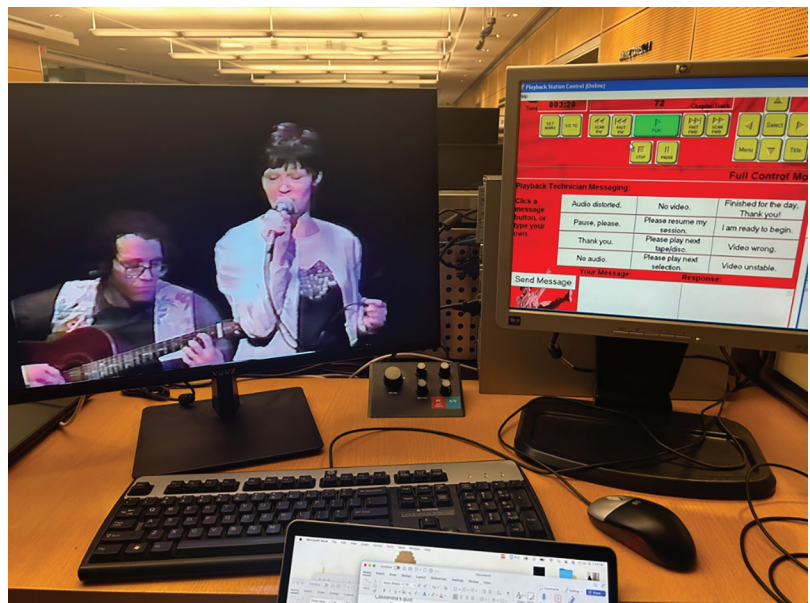


Figure 2. Video recording playback setup on monitor. By the author.

Once located, the technician downstairs would play the disc and cast it to the upstairs desktop for me for as long as I needed to watch the video, take notes, and so on. That was the purpose of the first monitor, while the second was used to control the playback and communicate with the technician. Because this process was assisted by a real person as opposed to a computer, the library did not want its patrons to finish their work and leave without informing the staff who were in the archival room. Therefore, this second monitor came with the option to contact the technician with preset messages like “I am done for the day” or “Thank you,” or you can create your own custom message.

The process of watching the video and taking notes was as seamless as could be, and I was given as much time as needed to play, replay, and rewind in order to take sufficient notes for my piece. Working with this kind of equipment was a novel experience for me, one that was particularly informative given the technologies it was utilizing. In a world where the rapid growth of technology can be frightening, to say the least, it created some sense of grounding to know that the important task of learning could still be accomplished with devices such as these.

Because the required materials were viewable only on-site, and at this specific library branch no less, I had to make several trips from my apartment in Flatbush all the way on the B Train to the Upper West Side. The Library for the Performing Arts proved to be an excellent “work-from-home” location.

One of my follow-up visits fell on the day of the World Microsoft CrowdStrike outage, in which a cybersecurity software error brought down associated IT systems throughout the world, and the NYPL was no different.³ The network outage impacted the library’s resource-locating processes. While under normal circumstances, staff members could check to see if a given resource was available through a search on a computer database, now this task would need to be done the old-fashioned way: a person would need to go down to the archival room to ensure that the item was on file. It showed that even while using DVDs and decade-old desktops, modern software and technology systems played a key role in their functioning, and any technology glitch could make them vulnerable.

A New Lease on Libraries

At the time of this writing, I have completed the first draft of my research piece on Judith Ren-Lay. This would have simply not been possible without the NYPL and everything that this system encompasses. My project also sent me to the NYPL Central Branch—the Steven A. Schwarzman Building—as well as numerous others, either for the task of checking out site-specific resources or simply as new places to gather with friends and get the work done.⁴

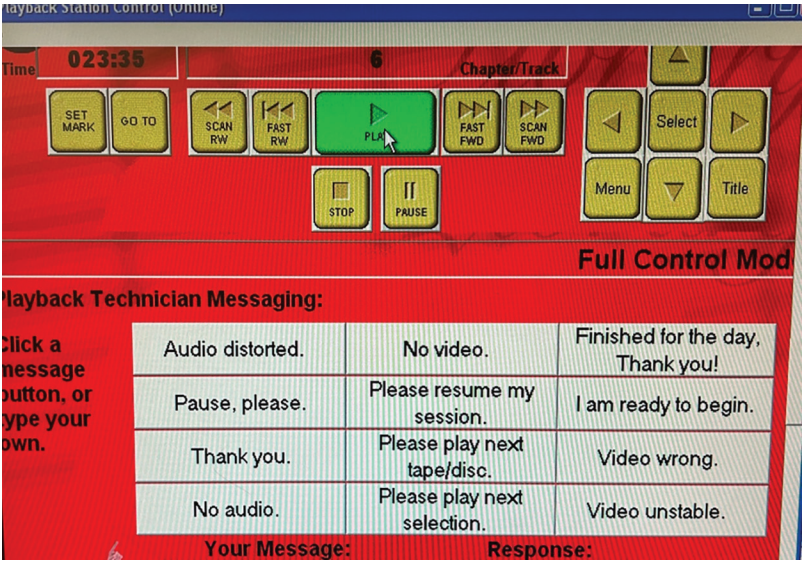


Figure 3. Playback controls on monitor. By the author.

Accessing all of my various video recordings, text publications, or journal articles was seamless, and they could always be requested with the help of staff. Because I, as a new library patron, was unaware of even how to view a resource at a library, having staff so well trained and knowledgeable of the organizational system and procedures for locating and distributing resources was very comforting. I was able to sit for hours at my desktop setup, watching video recordings and sending an occasional message to the technician there to ensure I was not overstaying my welcome. I was always met with grace and encouragement.

One of my sources was a magazine article from 1990, and with the help of available staff, I was able to check it out within minutes of my arrival at the branch, this time requesting help from a different group of the library team than those who had handled my video requests. This too was done with the same efficiency and care.

The abundance of resources available to us is only as good as the library staff who facilitate and enable interactions and services to view these resources, which would be rendered useless without this human element. This is something that is understood very well throughout the NYPL system. At each branch, I was met with not only plenty of computers, workstations, and spaces in which to do work but also, and most importantly, the friendly and knowledgeable staff. Although I started out by wanting to highlight the physical aspects of the library that may go unnoticed, I quickly realized that my biggest discovery was the wonderful *people* who worked in libraries—both at Vassar and at the NYPL. I never had to wait to have a question answered or for a seat to become available. Even in the midst of the global Microsoft outage, I did not have to wait to have my resource checked for and located. All of my many visits to the library showed me the consistent desire to show us, the patrons, exactly what we were looking for and maybe even a few things we did not expect to find.

Dear Library Staff

There is not much that I would say I'd change from my experiences visiting and utilizing public libraries for my research projects. It allowed me to learn so much more about not only the topic that I was interested in, but also about the process of gathering information and bringing together knowledge from different sources. Further, it also taught me the extent to which staff play a key role in doing so.

I definitely do not want to speak for all library patrons; however, from my perspective, I had not fully grasped the role of library staff prior to embarking on this project. I ensured to have all my sources found and ready to go before arriving so that I could make the job of the staff as easy as possible to locate them. However, upon interaction, it was clear to me that the mindset of the staff was not to prioritize getting people in and out quickly. Rather, it was to genuinely aid in my research. When inquiring about potential sources for my piece, I was often directed to similar possible articles, essays, videos, or reviews. I felt compelled to discuss my story with them and what I was seeking to understand through my research.

I think that emphasizing the idea of a library staff member as a guide and collaborator would greatly improve how the public conceives of and uses library spaces. Likewise, I believe that understanding libraries in all their richness would greatly enhance patrons' research. For my future research projects, I intend to place less emphasis on solitary searching for sources; instead, I hope to engage in the process in a much more collaborative fashion with library staff.

The visits to library branches have also given me a much better sense of what motivates library staff and what goals they have in mind. They are driven by the ideals and ethics that anyone

could and should have, not only in research work but also in navigating learning in life in general. My experience has prompted me to look into the “Core Values of Librarianship,” which serve to guide their work.⁵ These included such professional values as “access” or “public good.” However, I didn’t need to look at the website to see that this was the case. I am still extremely grateful for the openness and empathy of library staff, and for how their actions and attitudes made me feel empowered to continue on a project when finding resources proved difficult. At one point in my search, I needed help locating a New York dance magazine article, and the staff brought me a book that contained thousands of reviews and encouraged me to look through all of the sections to see what could be useful beyond one specific review that I had in mind for my piece. In another case that I described earlier, when technology was down due to the CrowdStrike outage, staff personally talked me through the research process and explained what the issue was. They also helped me remain optimistic and reassured me that my research could go on, even when technology malfunctions, and that I would get the resources I needed, even if it was much more challenging for them to navigate their vast repository. In doing so, they went much further in their efforts than what their daily tasks entailed. Last but definitely not least, they treated me with genuine kindness and understanding, which was demonstrated each and every time.

I can say with certainty that my piece would not have been possible without the help of library staff. Throughout my experience, they went above and beyond what their “responsibilities” might have been in their job description because this line of work is so much more than that. All efforts in cataloging, collection management, and public service are there in pursuit of a simple but altogether humanistic belief that anyone can learn and should have the tools and the skills to do so. The library doesn’t make more money if more people use it, nor do library staff get raises if their service is excellent rather than just good. At the end of the day, they are here for people like me, or you, or anyone. I know that they can and will serve as guides, collaborators, information providers, and educators for anyone who has a desire to learn and grow. And if this desire is all you need to have access to such wonderful, professional people and a wealth of knowledge, who could say no?

A Library Map

Through my outings to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, I became incredibly motivated to check out more branches of the city’s library system and to explore other parts of Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn. Although these spaces did not have the archival works that the Library for the Performing Arts did, they served as excellent working spaces, with the same kind of devoted and dedicated staff and the ever-present commitment to encouraging learning, of course. There are more than 200 total branches of the NYPL, BPL, and QPL. This speaks volumes about the communal nature of these spaces, with each physical location tailored to fit its specific group of patrons, its community. In a city whose population outnumbers many countries, it is this kind of thought and care that makes each branch feel so special.

Some branches meld the modern with the historic, undergoing renovations to maintain the traditional feel of the space while upgrading certain elements to meet current needs. Located in the West Village, Jefferson Market Library’s (NYPL) gothic, cathedral-like feel was not undone by recent reconstructions to increase the space.⁶ Other libraries lean more into the contemporary aesthetic, with high ceilings and long glass windows, like the Stavros Niarchos Library in Midtown.⁷ And some may be less aesthetically adventurous, choosing to do what mid-sized branches do: provide a safe space for their local community, be it giving access to Wi-Fi, after-school programming for kids, or classes in which adults could learn new languages; they all carry the same significance to those who

visit. As of this writing, I have compiled a map of every NYPL branch in the city, with a mission to visit as many as I can. So far, I have gone to 20, with the hope of many, many more to come.

Final Musings

As I am working to complete my research, I now have a few distinct conclusions that I have come away with. First, the libraries provide, for free, an incomparable store of information, and, unfortunately, people may not understand the *extent* to which libraries support and nurture their communities. Second, and perhaps more importantly, in libraries, you can meet some of the kindest, most genuine people you can find.

Libraries in New York serve a distinctively crucial purpose. Whereas libraries on a college campus stand as spaces of research or hangouts, for public libraries to exist within a population of more than eight million people, where each person has varying expectations of a library space, takes an unbelievable amount of planning on a macro level, to ensure that diverse needs are met, and an immense amount of care and dedication on a micro level too.

My goal with my research project was to explore a new topic of interest to me. However, taking a step back to examine the way I was going about it allowed me to discover so much more than I would have otherwise. I learned, first, how much I *didn't* know about libraries prior to this project. However, I turned what may have always remained unknown into something that I could write about and present to other people. I hope that through my journey of becoming informed about the full and true potential of a library, I help other patrons to realize the potential of these spaces.

Acknowledgments

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