

DJ “Prince” Charles Smith, Description of Record Collection

This LP collection is part of a project to document LGBTQ history and culture in Mississippi. It consists of eight hundred sixty-four 12” vinyl dance tracks and remixes, pop singles, and full-length albums that belonged to Charles Smith, a record aficionado and DJ from Booneville, Mississippi. Most of the LPs are releases from the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s.

Smith, also known as DJ “Prince Charles,” set the soundtrack for queer life in the state. Smith spun records at several gay bars in Mississippi: the short-lived venue in rural Palmetto called “Cow Patties,” a bare-bones building that sat in the middle of roaming cows (from roughly late 1993 - early 1994); CrossRoads in Columbus, which Smith also ran for a short period in 1996 or 1997; a lesbian-owned bar in Shannon called O’Hara’s that was opened by PJ Newton in October of 1994 and closed in March of 1998 (Smith DJed at O’Hara’s for most of this time but left for about a year to DJ at CrossRoads); and then Rumors, a bar that Rick Gladish owned and operated from April 1998 to December 2005. Rumors was opened where O’Hara’s was formerly located in Shannon (Smith DJed at Rumors from 1998 - 2004).¹

When Rumors first opened, Smith’s Technics turntables and Coffin---a padded a padded transportable case that holds turntables and mixers) were permanent fixtures of Rumors. Gladish describes Smith as someone who took great pride in his records and in his role as a DJ. Smith was not a big fan of top 40 hits. He favored remixes of 70s and 80s dance music. But, according to Gladish, Smith did purchase pop hits for the “girls” (drag queens) who performed drag shows at Rumors. Gladish recalls Smith showing up to the bar with a black bag full of 12” vinyl in tote that he had pre-selected for that night’s set. Smith kept great care of his records and insisted that others who played his records put the records back in their sleeves where they belonged. His warnings to friends and other DJs must have worked – the records are in superb condition.

Ronda and Clyde McDowell acquired this collection months after Smith died on June 13, 2008. Clyde, a music enthusiast who bought and sold used LPs as a hobby, found this collection through an online Classified Ad. With the help of Amy, his daughter, he picked up the records at a small mobile home outside of Tupelo, Mississippi. At that time, the McDowells did not know Smith and were unaware of his role as a DJ. The collection contained an LP cardboard box addressed to Charles Smith from Dixie Dance-Kings, a company based in Alpharetta, Georgia. Once perusing the collection further, they realized that this was a rare collection and that some album covers had a decidedly queer edge. Ronda McDowell, who was the former President of the Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregation in Tupelo, remembered that she had met a UU member named Charles Smith when she was setting up the Welcoming Congregation Program, the first one in the state to help UU members undo homophobia and transphobia in their congregations and communities. Smith participated in some of that Welcome programming, but he was more involved in the Tupelo UU’s Communication Committee and helped systematize their inventory (UU documents indicate that Smith was most active from 2001 - 2004). When Ronda watched the internationally acclaimed documentary film *Small Town Gay Bar* (Ingram 2006), she learned that Smith was a DJ at Rumors, a discovery that matched the ink pens nestled between the records that read, “RUMORS, Where it all Begins, Shannon, MS.”

Understanding that this was an important part of queer south history, the McDowells stored the records and hoped that Smith’s collection might one day become part of a queer history archive or special collection.

¹ These dates are based on the best recollection of Rick Gladish.