

# There's something to be said for storing up treasures on earth

**T**he late photojournalist W. Eugene Smith never threw anything away. Known mostly for his uncompromising photo essays in *Life Magazine*, *Newsweek* and elsewhere, he died in 1978 — and people are still digging for treasures buried in the mountain of stuff he left behind.

Among the possessions Smith bequeathed to the University of Arizona are eight years worth of photographs and audiotapes now being hailed as a golden contribution to the history of American Jazz.

From 1957-65, Smith lived in a dank and dirty New York City loft building that served as a place to create, rehearse and hold all-night jam sessions for hundreds of jazz musicians.



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Composer and pianist Thelonious Monk and many other legendary artists are among those whose candid conversations and musical genius

were recorded by Smith on 4,000 hours of audiotape and roughly 40,000 photographs.

I had the pleasure recently of meeting Sam Stephenson, a Duke University historian, who discovered Smith's work and has written a book titled "The Jazz Loft Project." You can learn more about the book — and find stories, interviews and several of Smith's photos and audio tracks — at [jazzloftproject.org](http://jazzloftproject.org).

With the blessing of Smith's children, Stephenson won a grant to preserve their father's material. He has spent the last 14 years cataloging, archiving, selecting and editing Smith's work from the project.

Although it has been a labor of love for Stephenson, he told me that, as a writer, he often feels he should be creating works of his own. I can relate to that feeling, but in the opposite way.

I make a living creating my own works as a writer. But I often feel I should be cataloging, archiving, selecting and editing the mountain of stuff left behind by someone I consider a creative genius — my father.

If Wiley Rutledge had been famous when he died two years ago, I'd write a grant proposal

for preserving the more than 50 years worth of writings he left behind. But the only thing Dad had in common with someone like Smith — besides creativity and depression — is that he never threw anything away.

My father was a minister, so there are piles of handwritten sermons that should be preserved and shared. He also was a songwriter and a poet. During the 1970s, Dad spent a lot of time in Nashville rubbing elbows with country music artists and other songwriters. He would excitedly share with his teenage son the latest song he'd written and which singer he thought should record it.

Stephenson's success in preserving and sharing Smith's body of work is inspiring. It's a tedious process, though. For

every 10 minutes of interesting sound on Smith's tapes, for instance, Stephenson says there are hours and hours of silence.

Some listeners, he says, find that even the silence is interesting. Some treasure hunts are fun even when you don't strike gold.

When I visit my mother, I like to go treasure hunting in Dad's old study. I've shared several gems from those expeditions here, but I know there's enough gold in that old desk to fill a book.

Such a book might never be hailed as a golden contribution to American history, but it's what I should be doing.

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