



Celebrating Its
Second Century

**Testimony of Duane A. Watson, Chief Librarian for Preservation
Library of Congress Hearings on
The Current State of American Television and Video Preservation
March 19, 1996**

Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Duane A. Watson. I am the Chief Librarian for Preservation at The New York Public Library. The New York Public Library is the world's largest public library system, consisting of 82 branch libraries and four world-renowned research centers: The Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences at 5th Avenue & 42nd Street, The Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem and the soon to be opened Science, Industry and Business Library at Madison Avenue and 34th Street. The Library's Preservation Program, now in its 30th year and involving more than 70 full time staff members, coordinates preservation services for each of The Library Centers. Each year more than 100,000 items from the collection, which now surpasses 50 million cataloged items, receive some kind of preservation treatment.

The Library commends the Librarian of Congress for embarking on this study and providing national leadership in the field of American television and video preservation. We are pleased that the study includes representation from a wide range of organizations and individuals. It is especially encouraging that The Librarian is seeking information on the preservation efforts and needs of the various types of public institutions with video holdings. These measures, we believe, are essential if a comprehensive national television and video preservation program is to be established. This includes adequate funding, the development of preservation priorities and the development of national standards. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this study by sharing The New York Public Library's experience with and concern about video preservation both through this hearing and in the more detailed survey which we are in the process of completing.

Background

The New York Public Library's videotape holdings are often "primary documents," unpublished and unique recordings of artists and their works. They document the most significant artists and events of our time and contain local and individual interpretations of people and events. They are vitally important elements within the video tape preservation which is under consideration.

Another area of immense importance both in quantity and quality are videotapes which were "published" but which are no longer available anywhere else and which are not being preserved anywhere else.

Together, these two types of videotapes "document" the past thirty years in detailed ways which must be preserved for future generations of study. Without these tapes, a significant and dynamic issues in our history will be lost.

Videotape has become the "medium of choice" of the past two or three decades, particularly by artists and recorders of social and cultural life who for the first time in history can obtain affordable equipment to record their own works and observations. This is especially true for dance and choreographic works. Also, educators and students have utilized videotape as a pivotal communication and teaching device for transmitting information in every subject. Consequently, the preservation of so important an aspect of American culture must be one of our national priorities.

The documentation and the dramatization of our experiences that were once exclusively captured on film are increasingly being captured on videotape. We must take immediate steps to assure that this physically fragile medium is preserved or we will lose a substantial part of the history of the last two decades.

We live in an era of transition from information and artifacts in chemicals on paper to information in electronic forms. As we undergo this transition, the ultimate answers to preservation of electronic information and materials cannot be known with certainty. Copying to the currently best format is the option available, while we await technological changes which lead to longer permanence. Because we will be continuing this transition for many years, we must devise strategies to save as much videotape as possible. Funding for the transfer of videotapes to a more stable medium is desperately needed during the wait for an alternative "preservation medium" to arrive.

Preservation Concerns: Types of Materials

The scope and subject matter of the television and video materials held by the various divisions of The New York Public Library, and the procedures followed for preserving and providing access to them is varied. However, the common concerns regarding television and video preservation have encouraged cooperative efforts and assistance by the Preservation Program. Together we are preserving video footage that would appear to fall outside the scope of other institutions or individuals. Some of these are productions that were created originally for television broadcast; others are not fully edited or are productions that were not created for theatrical exhibition. We feel that these types of materials merit preservation because of their value to researchers and to the history of television and video. Researchers and documentary video makers require large volumes of raw footage from which to select appropriate segments, just as filmmakers will shoot many more hours of footage than will ever make their final cut.

For these reasons, we would urge that concern be given not only to the preservation and restoration of individual released titles, but also to collections that contain released, unreleased and raw television and video footage. This is not to suggest the preservation of anything and everything. Given the costs, we recognize the importance of being

selective about what is preserved. The Study of the Current State of American Television and Video Preservation provides a vital opportunity for many institutions to share information and express concern. The hearings process also provides insight into appropriate selections for preservation efforts. However, unreleased titles and raw footage, held in research institutions, must be included in any plan designed to preserve the nation's television and video heritage. This material, when viewed by future generations, will provide them with greater insights into the people and events of the past and will be the basis upon which future generations will rely for their understanding and interpretation of the past.

Preservation Concerns: Funding

In order to assure the preservation of these treasures, institutions such as The New York Public Library rely upon funding from external sources for assistance. Increased national awareness and continued funding is necessary to secure environmental conditions and appropriate screening equipment, to preserve endangered materials and to train television and video historians, archivists, catalogers and technicians. Such support and cooperation between the holders of video collections will allow us to preserve our video legacy.

Preservation Concerns: Technical Standards

Scientific studies on video preservation issues must be undertaken to examine the unstable properties of video in relation to time and environment and to determine the negative impact of storage materials, systems and environment. National standards must be established, published and widely disseminated so that television and video archivists are not left to rely upon their own experiences and the studies conducted by the manufacturers of media materials. A forum such as the National Moving Image Database would provide a means of sharing bibliographic and technical information. We fully endorse a national survey of all institutions collecting and/or preserving television and video materials and are eagerly participating in this survey. This undertaking will provide some sense of the volume and scope of the nation's repositories. The results may be daunting but are essential to enlightened preservation decision making.

Preservation Concern: Ongoing Dialogue and Information Sharing

The New York Public Library already has become a "museum of equipment", as we face the need to preserve videotapes. Keeping old equipment in proper working order and using a telephone network of concerned professionals around the world to trace needed machine parts has become a daily part of the preservation work of staff who handle videotapes. Increased national attention and leadership to expand this network of obsolete equipment and parts will be an essential activity if we are to retain the videotaped work in our collections.

Finally, we would like to encourage The Librarian of Congress to facilitate an on-going dialogue among the various institutions whose comments were sought for this study and

testimony, and to encourage individuals and institutions not represented to join in a national effort. The Library of Congress should lead this effort to enable cooperation among institutions and individuals who share the wide range of concerns and problems associated with videotape preservation.

Increased support is also needed for the professional associations which are already actively focused upon the issues of videotape preservation. NYPL has found the most helpful sharing of problems and solutions to come from the American Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and the Media Alliance. Funding to attend meetings of these groups and funding for their cooperative projects need to be encouraged.

The New York Public Library Collections

The New York Public Library collects and preserves materials in all formats and it is our mission to provide free and open access to these materials. A number of units of The Library actively collect videotape. These include The Media Center at The Donnell Library; three divisions at The Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center: The Theater on Film and Tape Archive of The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The Dance Collection, and The Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound; The Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division at the Center for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

Donnell Media Center

The collection of nearly 15,000 videotapes at The Donnell Media Center, curated by Marie Nesthus, began with a modest acquisitions program in the 1970s. For nearly 25 years, film/video specialists and librarians at Donnell have been adding to the collection. Throughout the years, the collection's focus has been on independent film and video production of all varieties--documentaries, experimental pieces, independently produced feature films and videos, children's work and animation. Within the independent film/video community, the Donnell collection is so well known that inclusion in it is often noted on an artist's resume. Donnell also collects exemplary television programming--primarily American produced--but including work from around the world.

With the passage of time and the serious fluctuations within the independent or non-theatrical film and video industry (including failures of distributors and film laboratories), a great number of productions are no longer generally available. Some have simply been dropped from distribution; others have been lost completely, with all original materials destroyed or missing. The Media Center increasingly finds itself to be the owner of rare, and in some instances, unique materials. As a result, Donnell's collections serve as an essential research resource for other institutions and for students, academics and scholars. An important segment of video and cultural history can be found on Donnell's shelves.

Although The Donnell Media Center has never had the funding necessary to house its collection under archival conditions, it has carefully inspected, repaired and maintained its videotapes. Donnell's holdings are full accessible. They have been thoroughly cataloged in machine readable form, and printed catalogs are available to the public for consultation and for sale. Donnell makes tapes available for screening within its film and video study facility.

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Three divisions of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive, curated by Betty L. Corwin; The Dance Collection, curated by Madeleine Nichols; the Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, curated by Donald McCormick, also contain extensive video holdings.

Theatre on Film and Tape

The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive (TOFT) is the world's foremost collection of film and videotape of live theater performances and is the only institution authorized by America's theatrical guilds and unions to videotape live theater performances across the United States. In 1970, TOFT began to film, videotape, collect and preserve visual records of Broadway, off-Broadway and regional theater productions; dialogues, lectures and seminars featuring distinguished theater personalities; and a variety of theater-related programs for use by scholars, students, actors and directors. The major part of the Archive consists of theater productions video recorded during performance and includes excerpts from Rodgers and Hart and Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, as well as most of the outstanding productions of the last two decades, including **Equus**, **Amadeus**, **A Chorus Line**, **The Phantom of the Opera** and several productions of Shakespeare. Although TOFT's programs are made available on videocassette, the Archive has stored more than 132,000 feet of endangered film off-site. These consist of original films of Broadway productions recorded by TOFT prior to securing union permission to use videotape, kinescopes of early TOFT videotapes, and some materials acquired by TOFT from outside sources. The unique material in this archive provides significant information and research material relating to American cultural history.

The Dance Collection

The Dance Collection is fully cataloged in MARC records on RLIN/OCLC and available through the Internet. It is also available for sale as a printed book and on CD-ROM. The Dance Collection's moving image archive, now in its 31st year, contains over 8,000 videotapes. Since 1965, The Dance Collection has sought out and acquired films and videotape documenting all forms and styles of dance from the United States and around the world. The videotapes are unique and irreplaceable records documenting the greatest dancers and choreographers of the last three decades. Important ethnographic dance works of culturally specific groups are also included in the archive. Dance is an art where, in the past, most choreographic works have vanished within a generation of their creation. Moving image records are the closest

thing to a living record of a twentieth century dance. This is the first century in which the dancing could be recorded, because of the development of moving image technology. If there is no funding for preservation, these records are lost for all time.

The Dance Collection's videotapes are heavily used by the international dance community as well as by scholars, researchers, students, broadcasters and filmmakers for their professional and educational needs. Screenings of moving image records now represent more than fifty percent of the Dance Collection's in-house requests for its materials. In addition, The Dance Collection provides copies, after necessary rights are cleared, to conferences and symposia around the world and to dance companies and choreographers for use in the restaging of works. Recent examples of these uses include provision of videotapes to an exhibit in Japan, to the New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theater and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and to the choreographer Jerome Robbins.

Much of the videotape collection is unpublished material. In addition to those videotapes already in the archive, we can project from discussion with the dance community that large collections will be coming to us in the future. The Dance Collection will bear the long-term responsibility for preservation of this material. In addition to preservation, The Dance Collection, as a research center, is responsible for making viewing copies available. We are faced with the problems and costs of keeping up with generational migration from format to format of old and deteriorating copies, ever-changing current formats, and the high cost of storage. We must further deal with problems and costs of locating obsolete equipment, purchasing new equipment as formats evolve, and maintaining all equipment.

The Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives

The Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives also has a large collection of second-level unique videos of music and opera -- namely televised performances and productions, many of which stem from European or Asian broadcasts-- never aired in this country. This body of music video material has not yet been cataloged in any national utility or on-line service and therefore we are unable to provide access to the collection or assess the unique nature of our own holdings. In addition, the cataloging of such material does not fall into any formulas of standard cataloging rules and practices as published/commercial video material does, and a large portion of this music video material is in an obsolete format.

There is no funding to catalog or preserve this material, now numbering in the thousands of items; nor are there any guidelines or sources for discovering what, if any, of this material may be held or is being preserved elsewhere.

The Schomburg Center

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is among the world's foremost institutions devoted to documenting, preserving and providing access to research

resources on the historical and cultural development of peoples of African descent throughout the world. Over the past two decades the Center's Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division, curated by James Briggs Murray, has developed collections of materials documented by way of audio-visual technology. Included are some 15,000 recorded music discs, 6,000 hours of oral history recording (including radio broadcasts, lectures, conference proceedings, and dramatic readings), 4,000 videotapes (primarily public affairs television programs and television commercials) and a substantial collection of motion picture film (principally documentaries). Approximately 500 films, consisting mostly of 16 mm documentaries, complement the Center's holdings in other formats. Included are historical, political, anthropological, religious and performing arts documentaries illustrating life experience (and interpretations thereof) in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, South America and Latin America. Many of the titles are currently out of distribution.

Since 1980 The Schomburg Center has regularly conducted videotaped oral history interviews and is currently documenting all public programs--lectures, conference, concerts and theatrical productions--on broadcast quality videotape through its Oral History Video Documentation Program.

Patrons have in-house access to screening completed documentaries or outtakes. The Schomburg Center prints are not loaned, but are restricted to screening for research purposes on library premises. No reproductions are permitted without verified, written permission from copyright holders.

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division

The Manuscript Collection, curated by Mary Boone Bowling, in The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, holds more than 150 videotapes in a number of different formats. The videotapes document a wide variety of subjects relating to twentieth century American history. They include documentaries, outtakes from documentaries, and political and personal coverage of issues important to the study of American cultural history.

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division received a grant from the U. S. Department of Education to preserve and describe some of its audio-visual holdings. In the course of the two-year project, approximately 65% of the film and video material was described at collection level in RLIN, and this information is in The Library's on-line catalog. Item-level descriptions were entered into a database that is available to on-site researchers. The significant work started during this grant has stopped because the grant program has not been eliminated and additional funds are not available.

Conclusion

Because of the needs and problems associated with the numerous and varied collections housed at The New York Public Library, we applaud the efforts of The Librarian of Congress and his staff. These hearings and the accompanying survey provide an

opportunity to participate with our distinguished colleagues in this important step toward a national preservation program for America's television and video heritage. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss The New Public Library's concerns about the preservation of this fragile and fugitive medium and to add its support for a national preservation program.