

Request for Information; Study on the Current State of Recorded Sound Preservation

BACKGROUND

I write these observations based upon my personal experiences of 40+ years as a collector of audio recordings and a researcher, with many years of concurrent experience as an educator, broadcaster, curator of a recordings archive, and as the head of a record label.

Central to the observations I plan to share are the changes that were made to my job three years ago, as I see them as being symptomatic of the challenges facing those who would preserve our recorded heritage. Twenty-five years ago the University of Texas at Austin General Libraries hired me to build a recordings collection to serve the teaching programs, to provide reference assistance, and to develop the audiovisual and computer based public services for our library. In addition to those responsibilities, about 5% of my time was devoted to building an archive of recorded sound, a research collection directed more towards the preservation of our musical cultural history than a collection designed as an adjunct to the process of teaching. Over the years the archive acquired substantial collections of great significance. In recent years, freeing time from my other responsibilities, I had been able to begin preserving a substantial portion of our collection originally recorded on chemically unstable materials. At the request of the Preservation and Conservation Studies program in our graduate School of Information, I began teaching the first classes in audio preservation and audio archives management to be offered in higher education. Five years ago our then Library Director offered me the opportunity to devote my full time to the archive and to teaching. Two years later we had a new Library Director and I was removed from teaching and oversight of the archive and now devote my time to copy cataloging commercial recordings. Oversight of the archive is now done by an individual with no background in discography or audio preservation. No substantive collection development or preservation is being done.

While the personal loss is overwhelming, more to the point is what this says about the current state of libraries and their sense of the value of history and the skills required to preserve that history. Upon learning of this tragic turn of events, our former Director wrote most tellingly of the mindset which likely led to such a change.

"During about the last two years of my directorship of the General Libraries, I became increasingly frustrated that I could not convince several of my most senior colleagues that there was just as much reason to be concerned with the preservation of sound-related formats as there was for printed or digital information."

For me, the disregard for the importance of our recorded history and the knowledge required to maintain and service it, as so tragically demonstrated by our new director, is somewhat symptomatic of the fundamental challenges facing those who would preserve our recorded heritage. In short, there is no consensus as to the importance of our recorded history and the skills required to preserve it.

LOST COLLECTIONS AND LOST OPPORTUNITIES

As a broadcaster I have observed the destruction of unique interview recordings and historically significant broadcast performances. Several examples come to mind. When a radio station changed formats, the entire set of master tapes of the broadcasts of the Houston Symphony during the years Leopold Stokowski was conductor, were thrown out. Those years documented the first performances of many significant works and were a part of music history. Incidental to this turn of events, a fairly complete set of these performances, recorded privately, was in the process of being preserved in our University Collection. With the recent changes in administration that work was not considered important enough to continue.

One of our local broadcasters spent his summer vacations in California recording interviews of the major film composers of his time. These recordings were used to support his programs devoted to film music. Since our library is no longer actively collecting, these interview recordings are likely to be lost. This same classical station had a policy to interview musicians appearing with our local orchestra. Those performers included some of the most significant musicians of the 20th Century. With a change in management of the radio station, those tapes were discarded.

Through my familiarity with several different Music Schools I have seen them place little value in their own recorded history. I have observed several university collections which house(d) recorded interviews with visiting scholars, first performances of historically significant works, as well as the first recorded examples of some of the most distinguished American trained musicians, rotting away on chemically unstable materials or being discarded. While Indiana University appears to have a significant, well-developed program to preserve their own audio recordings, they are, in my experience, one of the few exceptions to the rule.

Not only are the collections of our performing organizations, record companies and

libraries in jeopardy, but also vast collections held in private hands. Today many a library will not accept a substantive donation of recordings without a commensurate donation of an endowment to maintain that collection. Based upon my own personal experience as a collector, coupled with my knowledge of the collections owned by the major institutional repositories, only the recordings collection of the Library of Congress has a depth that exceeds the holdings that can be found in private hands. These substantial collections in private hands contain unique, significant artifacts of our recorded heritage, materials not to be found in any institutional collection.

Several private collectors, potential donors to our University, concerned at the actions of our new Library Director, have looked to other alternatives to house their collections. Many of my collector friends are adopting a practice of willing their collections to the "last collector standing." At this point in time, with the lack of interest, as evinced in the changes in our library, there would seem to be no other logical alternative.

COPYRIGHTS

Libraries are often expected to preserve recordings in which the content of the recording is owned by another organization. Consider the broadcast recordings held in the Library of Congress. Public money is being used to preserve and maintain the assets of organizations like the Boston Symphony. However, libraries, subject to the copyrights, rarely have the right to provide reasonable access to the public.

Some of these recordings feature unpublished concert performances, of substantive historic importance, by our nation's most significant musical organization. Under the copyrights, the ownership of the audio of these recordings most likely resides with the performing organization. Since the library does not own the content of these recordings, they must limit access to on-site listening. As a researcher, because I do not have the financial resources to travel to a library that holds such a unique recording, I am not able to study it. I have written many organizations including the Boston and National Symphonies and, even with the offer of paying money, been refused permission to obtain a copy of a live performance I needed for study. Further, even if I did have the resources to travel to the holding library, without permission for a copy, I would not be able to share the recording with my students. What good is preserving history when it cannot be reasonably accessed for research, or used in the process of teaching?

History belongs to the people. If we believe there is history to be found in recorded sound, we must provide a means of making it reasonably available. Unless there are matters of national security or propriety involved, the public should be provided reasonable access to intellectual property held and preserved in our publicly funded

institutions. It is not unreasonable to argue this point under the notion of eminent domain. The rights of ownership need to be balanced with the public's right to reasonable access. There must be some changes to our copyrights, which address these issues.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If libraries are to be seen as the repositories of our recorded heritage, there will need to be some fundamental changes in the thinking within the library profession. Libraries have built much of their identity on the printed word or its electronic equivalent. As we reconstruct the history of our species we look to our archeological artifacts, then our writing. Now, we have an added depth to our historical trail, the audio and video representation and expression of our species. It has taken audio many years to develop a viable status within the academic environment. In the past, recordings have been seen as supplemental, at times an adjunct to teaching, or a guide to the realization of a printed music score, or, in the case of oral histories, a tool for developing texts. The recording itself was not considered primary source material. It is therefore understandable that there was not, to use the words of our former library Director, "just as much reason to be concerned with the preservation of sound-related formats as there was for printed or digital information."

It has been only within the last 15 years of my professional experience that I have observed the teaching and research establishment assign intrinsic musicological worth to audio recordings. As we now have recordings that are over 100 years old, there is sufficient evidence to observe quantifiable changes in musical interpretation. We now have what might be considered to be an historically significant legacy to consider.

Contributing to recordings' rising value within the academic community is the increasing respect being brought to the discipline of ethnomusicology. Many music traditions that rely solely on aural traditions are becoming part of the course of study. This is also true in the study of the aural traditions of vernacular music of the modern world, as very little of that music exists in notated form. Transcription was originally seen as the primary means to preserve such a heritage, however, now, the recording itself is being seen as having the role of the primary source.

WRONG SOLUTIONS

Grants are not the answer. As curator, when I asked for support for our recordings archive, I was told to write a grant. As evinced in one of the more telling situations involving a recordings archive housed in a University, the Eastman School of Music

applied for and was granted a substantial amount of money to preserve the recordings of their American Music Festivals. When the grant money ran out, about 10% of the collection had been reformatted. To the best of my knowledge, since the time those funds were exhausted, no substantive work has been done on that collection. Grants have never provided long term solutions.

SOLUTIONS

I believe that our hope for a viable solution will be found in a partnership among funding organizations, institutions, libraries and private collectors. It will require individuals of vision who value the past, and are in position to implement change, redirect, and acquire additional resources to provide contiguous support for audio preservation.

We have immediate needs. The library's role as the warehouse of printed history has generally been theirs by default, as whatever of their collections survived became a part of our cultural record. Recordings are usually less durable than print, hence, by default, fewer will survive. The needs for audio preservation are more immediate. Already some of our recorded history has been lost through neglect.

If indeed, we as a society see importance to the preservation of our recorded history, we either must make substantive changes in our priorities in libraries, or we must look elsewhere for the preservation of both our print and our recorded history.

The preservation of our recorded history must be considered as a part of the larger role of Preservation in our research libraries. Currently, only 3.5% of the budget of the Association of Research Libraries member Libraries is devoted to preservation. Considering the value of our history, this percentage seems absurdly small. Clearly research libraries do not see the preservation of history as a substantive portion of their charge. If libraries are to be our institutions for the preservation of not only our recorded but also our intellectual history, we must give those charged with the responsibilities of preservation and conservation added authority within the infrastructure of libraries. They must also be given an appropriate portion of the budget to execute those responsibilities.

While many libraries are redirecting some of their resources to reformatting, they do not see that functionality as being part of the process of preservation. This is evinced in fact that these activities are generally under the administrative umbrella of those charged with the acquisition and dissemination of digital information and not those trained in, and charged with, responsibility for preservation and reformatting. Similarly, many digitization initiatives are not being done at a level of resolution required by generally

accepted preservation standards. This must be changed.

Little of our cultural heritage has survived due to a consciously considered, rigorously applied preservation plan. It has survived due to happenstance, the quirks of natural history, and the collecting habits of a relatively small percentage of our population. Institutions are rarely the initial primary collecting agencies as they usually acquire the collections built and developed by individuals, corporations and other entities.

There is little sense of a universally accepted societal worth to what is acquired and preserved by institutions. Those decisions are often imposed by a set of criteria which are predicated on some exigency of the moment, a current research trend, the notoriety a collection might lend to an institution or a perceived potential to attract monetary donations.

Our current technology does not even afford us with a cost effective, reliable means to preserve digital information, let alone to do the needed audio reformatting. Therefore it seems logical that we develop an informed set of criteria for selecting that which is to be preserved and work to improving our technological resources to bring about a more cost effective means to do reformatting.

With the vast quantities of audio in need of preservation, (by some estimates, as much as 30M hours) we cannot hope to save it all. This leaves us with the least tangible and quantifiable skill, that of the development and implementation of informed selection. I sincerely believe that our best hope for informed selection comes from those with the greatest knowledge of, and respect for, history. Sadly, a review of the curricula of our library schools does not indicate their graduates are likely to be the best qualified to meet that challenge. Of equal value are the skills required to preserve that history. Knowledge of these two areas must be given increased credence within the course of study for those entrusted with the preservation of our recorded history.

The greatest and most fundamental challenge that remains, as suggested in the writing of our former library Director, is to convince those with the resources to preserve our recorded history, of the imperative to preserve it, and of the importance of the skills required to do so. This is a formidable task, especially when one considers that the copyrights inhibit both the preservation and dissemination of our recorded history. We must make accommodations in our laws to address these concerns. We must amend our course of study in library schools to include class work related to the value of the preservation of history, as well as the library's role in that process. We must focus substantive attention to the programs of study, which address the means to preserve that history. We must reapportion the budgets of our research collections to ensure our

history will survive. I believe we should not let the tragic situation at the University of Texas at Austin serve as our model for the future.

Faithfully,

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Pierian Recording Society-President
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