

**Toward a National Audio Preservation Program  
Selected Issues**

*Statement for the National Recording Preservation Board  
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*Submitted by*

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In response to the *Notice of Inquiry; Request for information; Notice of Hearing: Study on the Current State of Recorded Sound Preservation*, I write as a library director charged with developing and overseeing a forward-looking audio preservation program (The Harvard College Library Audio Preservation Services). In this capacity, I have worked closely with Harvard's Weissman Preservation Center and its overall programs led by Jan Merrill-Oldham and I have served as advisor and reviewer for numerous projects and grant review panels for audio preservation across the country. This experience has left me with a sense of issues common to many collections across the country. What I have to say is not particularly new but represents core concerns that I feel are critical to the success of a national program. I summarize these briefly here. I, as well as David Ackerman and Bruce Gordon, HCL APS's audio engineers whose statements follow mine, would be happy to provide further detail that I will summarize here as briefly as possible. if necessary.

As has been pointed out elsewhere by many experts, our audio preservation paradigm has shifted emphasis to preservation of content over preservation of the carrier of the content. Further, we are now functioning in a digital world that necessitates coordinated work by audio engineers and systems experts in addition to collectors and curators. Components of a successful national program in these times would include collaboration among institutions with serious concern for audio preservation to produce and implement processes and resources that could be made widely available to others; establishment of more managed digital repositories throughout the country; development and engagement of professional staff equipped to do this work; and provision of financial resources for the processes of preservation and storage long term.

**Collaborative Planning and Execution.** The vast number of audio recordings held throughout the country, many of them rare or unique, and the urgency for treatment of their disintegrating carriers, particularly magnetic media, suggests that no one institution can develop the necessary protocols, best practices and standards alone in the limited time we have. A national preservation program would engage major institutions, public and private, in such a way that results of preservation activity could be readily shared for purposes of developing open source tools and processes that newcomers to the work could use. Such communication would bring the nation's talent pool of remarkably

skilled experts together to find not just one but the number of different paths to successful preservation. Various approaches to the same goal will be necessary for the wide array of environments in which our collections reside, from private homes to the Library of Congress itself. In turn, this sort of collaboration would produce a basis on which both institutional administrators and private individuals could confidently decide how to deploy their resources for the purpose of audio preservation. Ideally, the resulting digital objects would be interoperable, facilitating recovery and also user access from one collection to another.

To date, systematic discussions of audio preservation have been left to often-marginal committees in broader professional associations whose major concerns are librarianship, archiving of all sort of media or production engineering. Participants are frequently professionals with specializations and responsibilities outside of audio preservation who are in the position of seeking information rather than sharing expertise. “Guidelines” are then produced by librarians who have not consulted audio engineers, by engineers who have little understanding of institutional requirements and by any number of professionals unaware of the information systems requirements for managed digital storage. Dedicated and concerned professionals populate these groups but the groups themselves do not tend to contain the array of experts that audio preservation now requires.

The recent discussions and related publications sponsored by CLIR and the National Recordings Board have provided very good means of addressing the problem of bringing the necessary experts together and fostering effective communication. Setting modesty aside for a moment, I would suggest that the Sound Directions Project, conducted by Harvard’s Archive of World Music and Indiana University’s Archive of Traditional Music in consort with the information systems offices at the respective universities is another example of effective collaboration.<sup>1</sup> Funded by NEH, this project features a seven-member advisory board of experts in audio engineering, information systems and digital library development whose discussions have been instrumental to the success of the project. Another admirable project that would share expertise across regional institutions in the US has been conceived by PACT, a national consortium of non-profit folk life organizations, which would send “circuit-rider” experts to a number of collections across the country with the goal of making practical and well-informed plans for audio preservation in the separate archives. Other groups working internationally to good effect include the Technical Committee of the International Association of Sound and Audio Visual Archives and the Audio Engineering Society’s Working Group on Digital Libraries and Systems (SC-03-06) and its Technical Committee on Archiving, Restoration and Digital Libraries (TC-ARDL). A national program would feature ways to foster effective communication and collaboration across the necessary constituent communities. In a general way, we need to broaden our view of audio preservation to include work being done abroad. German National Radio, Memoriav in Switzerland, Norwegian national repositories and the National Library of Australia, among others, have launched major initiatives in digital preservation, storage and access from which we

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/projects/sounddirections/> as well as a separate submission from Indiana University authored by Mike Casey.

can learn much.

**Managed digital storage.** Reformatting to digital media will prove almost fruitless without managed digital repositories capable of storing, monitoring and migrating digital files over time. We now understand the remarkable fragility of DAT and the failure rates of recordable CDs and DVDs over relatively short periods of time, indicating clearly that these media would have to be reformatted again within a generation. Even if this work were affordable, it is quite impractical given the overall volume of recordings requiring treatment. Therefore, available managed storage constitutes an essential component of a national program. This need will come as no surprise to the Board and the Library with its NAVDCC. The question is whether we can, through public institutions throughout the country, build forward-looking managed storage facilities that small agencies such as local historical societies could use. Once again, collaboration and coordination at the national level would be necessary.

**Professional staffing:** Audio recordings are primary source documents of expressive culture, oral history, and significant communications of all sorts such as radio broadcasts. Like other primary source materials, long term preservation of these requires professional attention in the form of professional audio engineers trained in preservation. With complicated and rapidly changing technologies we need professional engineers to help in the selection, maintenance and upgrading of equipment and computer programs. We need them for the playback of recordings on magnetic media which may require skilled intervention at numerous and unexpected points during the process. We need them to help with collection assessment. The Library of Congress has maintained such a professional staff for many years. This staffing model needs to extend to work throughout the country. Too many of us have seen the need for preservation and then, absent shared knowledge and reasonable funding, have made use of whomever was at hand who seemed to know something about audio equipment. This approach has frequently produced recordings that now need to be migrated again or “stovepipe” projects that do not interact well with other related resources. We need a national program that can lead collectors and curators to engineering guidance from professionals accustomed to the issues of preservation and storage for the treatment of their collections. Large institutions need to bring professional engineering into their libraries and archives just as they would professional paper conservators. Communications need to be integrated to include the vocabularies of libraries, archives, engineering and systems administration. This problem is acute at the moment because very few library school graduates at present have the necessary technological training. There is no one-stop-shop for the needed professional expertise. By broadening our communications (and collaborative work) we should be able to identify the skills necessary and the places where these may be identified and fostered. However we do it, professionalization of this work is an absolute necessity.

**Funding.** A national audio preservation program can be developed through collaboration and communication across relevant institutions in the country, but conducting the actual work will require funding from somewhere. While some costs are declining (such as the cost of storage), others (including personnel) are holding steady or rising. For most

individuals and institutions audio preservation is new work, requiring equipment and personnel or an external partner agency. It is unlikely that these expenses can be met simply by rearranging priorities in one's budget.

Moving from digital project to preservation program presents another related financial concern. For small collections, one-time money and good partnerships for reformatting and storage may meet the case. However, a national preservation program will require investment in facilities and staff throughout the country in order to develop into institutional and technological partners.

I close with thanks for this opportunity. Developing a national program for audio preservation surely is a necessary investment as recorded media carry primary source documents of history and culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, documenting the modern and post-modern ages in the U.S.