



Comments for the National Recording Preservation Board Study on the Current State of Recorded Sound Preservation

Introduction

These comments are submitted on behalf of the Harry Ransom Center at The University of Texas at Austin. Established in 1957, the Ransom Center is one of the preeminent cultural archives in the world, with a major emphasis on the literature and culture of America, Great Britain, and France. The Center contains some 36 million manuscripts, more than one million rare books, five million photographs, and 100,000 works of art and design, including major collections relating to areas such as performing arts and film.

The central mission of the Ransom Center is to advance the study of the arts and humanities. To this end, the Center:

- Acquires original cultural material for the purposes of scholarship, education, and delight
- Preserves and makes accessible these creations of our cultural heritage through the highest standards of cataloging, conservation, and collection management
- Supports research through public services, symposia, publications, and fellowships
- Provides education and enrichment for scholars, students, and the public at large through exhibitions, public performances, and lectures

Sound Recording Holdings

The Center is a collecting archive and as such, the Center's holdings are extremely diverse. Sound recordings are generally acquired as components of collections. The Center's holdings of sound recordings include both unique original and commercial recordings. These recordings were usually created during the course of research, creative activity, or as a final product and/or actively collected by the creator of the collection.

Because of the diversity of the Center's holdings, numerous formats of sound recordings are in the collections, including audographs, wax cylinders, wire recordings, phonodiscs, dictabelt recordings, micro cassettes, digital audio tapes, digital recordings, compact discs, cassette tapes, reel-to-reel audio tapes, and optical and magnetic soundtracks.

The majority of original sound recordings, with the exception of certain collections and formats, are currently stored in one location in the Center. These recordings are physically segregated from but remain a part of the intellectual arrangement of the collections with which they were acquired. Sound recordings are stored in dark closed

stacks. The environmental conditions for this location range from 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 40 to 50 percent relative humidity. These measurements were averaged from data collected May 25, 2005 to January 5, 2007. Both original and commercial sound recordings are stored by format in archival housing on metal and wood shelving. Housing includes archival document boxes, protective enclosures, and specially created boxes. Within this housing, recordings may be stored in their original containers.

Moving image soundtrack, preservation and access copies, and recordings from certain collections are not stored in the same closed stack location as the majority of sound recordings. Moving image soundtrack film and soundtrack tapes are stored with moving image material in an environmentally monitored cold room. Preservation master copies are stored in two locations for security. One copy on CD-R disk is stored in the closed stacks and a second copy is maintained on servers managed by the Center. Access copies of sound recordings are stored separately from original recordings and preservation masters. These copies are located on wooden shelving in a dark hallway on a secure floor of the Center. Certain collections are not integrated into the sound recordings storage per curatorial request.

All original sound recordings are cataloged at the item level in the Sound Recordings database. This database tracks format, condition, and provenance information about the recording. Each recording is assigned a unique identification number. This number is assigned consecutively and by format. For example, the first reel-to-reel tape entered into the database would have the unique number R 0001. These unique numbers not only identify the recording but also serve as a locator number in the stacks.

The metadata for original recordings is integrated into the processing workflow for incoming collections. Descriptive cataloging information for original sound recordings includes creator, title of work, date, whether the recording is part of a series, and if there are any accompanying paper, sound, or moving image material. The condition of the recording, access copy information, and preservation master copy information are also tracked in the Sound Recordings database. The audio technician may add more information to the catalog record during preservation activity. Due to a lack of professional audio preservation metadata standards, the Center has developed metadata according to in-house needs.

At this time, commercial recordings are not cataloged using the Sound Recordings database. The Ransom Center Cataloging Department creates and edits records in OCLC. These records are then automatically added to the University of Texas online catalog system. Call numbers and stack locations assigned to these recordings function as unique identification numbers.

Preservation Efforts and Access

Preservation priorities for recorded sound holdings are currently determined by user demand. Patron requests for access to unpreserved audio material trigger preservation activity, including the creation of preservation master copies at 96 kHz/24 bits and access copies at 44.1 kHz/16 bits. Requests are also generated internally when audio content is

needed for the purposes of exhibition. Demand is steady and resources are limited, resulting in a preservation backlog. Ideally, capacity will be increased in the future and sound recordings can be prioritized for preservation based on other criteria such as condition, format, uniqueness, value, etc.

Preservation efforts for the recorded sound collections at the Ransom Center are undertaken by the Technology and Digital Services division. One 0.25 FTE student employee, typically a graduate student from the University's School of Information who has taken coursework in audio preservation, serves as an audio technician and advisor to the division head on matters of audio preservation policy. This paid position is a recent improvement over past years, when audio preservation work was undertaken by volunteers. The relationship with the School of Information is mutually beneficial and is one of many ways in which the Center contributes to the future of the archives and preservation fields. One downside to the reliance on student employees is the annual turnover and the resulting lack of continuity in preservation activities.

An audio preservation lab is maintained within the Technology and Digital Services division. The lab features one digital audio workstation and one workstation devoted to database entry. Plans for the future include upgrading the second workstation to be a fully functioning digital audio workstation. The current configuration of the audio workstation is a Dell PC running WaveLab6 on the Windows XP operating system. The current analog-to-digital converter is an RME Fireface 800, capable of a maximum sampling rate of 192 kHz and bit depth of 24. Playback equipment is available for the following analog formats: cassette tapes, 1/4" reel-to-reel tape (half-track) on reels up to 10" and speeds of 3.25 and 7.5 ips, discs up to 16" requiring styli from 0.7-4.0 mm and speeds of 33, 45, or 78 rpm, and wire recordings. An ample supply of gold CD-R discs and various housing and labeling materials is always available.

The Ransom Center views the preservation of the cultural heritage—in all formats—to be an essential part of its mission. The Center funds audio preservation activities through the Technology and Digital Services division, with the understanding that such preservation activity implies a sustained commitment to upgrading and migrating storage media and file formats in perpetuity. The Center is also committed to maintaining appropriate storage conditions and security measures for all holdings, including sound recordings. Plans are currently underway to build a cold storage vault for recorded sound media. Grants do not currently play a major role in funding preservation activities for sound recordings at the Center. One goal of recent efforts to identify and consolidate sound recordings in the Center is to facilitate grant-seeking activity.

As all of the audio preservation work is currently done in-house, by one technician, quality assurance is mostly a matter of working carefully and double-checking all end-products. Establishing, documenting, and then adhering to formal procedures is essential in this situation. To that end, the existing procedure manual is currently under review and will be updated to reflect newly acquired equipment and newly adopted standards. As a continuation of the identification and consolidation of sound recordings that has occurred recently, we will do a thorough evaluation of past preservation work to identify and,

where possible, correct some legacy problems. The main factor limiting our quality assurance and preservation efforts is time and funding.

The Ransom Center views preservation and access to be inextricably linked. As a non-profit, research institution open to the public, the Center takes its rights and responsibilities very seriously. The access restrictions and copyright status of the Center's holdings vary by collection due to the specifics of each acquisition agreement. For this reason, the preservation workflow for sound recordings relies on the collection curators to provide the relevant copyright information when reformatting requests are received. Copyright status aside, many of the requests for access copies of sound recordings fall well within the bounds of fair use. Also, the exemptions granted under Section 108 of the U.S. copyright law are considered the foundation for the preservation work that occurs in the Center's audio lab. The majority of the Center's sound recordings are unpublished works, and, published or unpublished, in obsolete and/or deteriorating formats.

Although the Section 108 exemptions provide essential liberties to the Center and other qualifying libraries and archives, the limitations regarding the dissemination of copies in digital formats remain a significant hindrance. At this point in the development of recorded sound technology, digital formats are not only expected, but required by researchers and the general public. Restricting distribution copies to analog formats is unreasonable and impractical when cassette tapes are rapidly becoming obsolete and audio CDs and MP3s have become the commercial standard.

Conclusion

The challenges facing the Ransom Center's sound recording holdings include space, funding, maintaining appropriate environmental conditions, and cataloging. While some of these challenges are not unique, the Center is actively working towards standards and solutions to best benefit our sound recording holdings. At present, the environmental conditions for sound recordings are not ideal, but planning is underway to install additional cold storage for sound recording media. The identification and cataloging of sound recording holdings is a priority. Prior archival practice has contributed to a backlog of uncatalogued and unidentified sound recordings. The archives and collections of the Ransom Center continue to grow and we are actively working to improve our management of sound recordings.

Respectfully submitted on January 30, 2007 by

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