LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SAVING AMERICA'S AURAL LEGACY

The American Folklife Center at the U.S. Library of Congress is home to the largest and most important collection of ethnographic field recordings in the world. This aural history of America includes thousands of recordings on wax cylinders, wire, aluminum discs, acetate, magnetic audio tape, and video tape. The more than 2.5 million sound recordings at the Library of Congress include the following:

• The NBC radio collection of radio shows from the 1930s through the later 1960s on about 150,000 16-inch lacquer discs.
• The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service collection on more than 200,000 16- and 12-inch lacquer-coated glass discs of programs that were broadcast to our armed forces from 1942 to the present.
• The Bob Hope collection of thousands of audio and film clips spanning his 70-year career.

This is just a small sampling of the holdings in the Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress. Within the American Folklife Center itself there are the following:

• The narratives of ex-slaves recorded in the 1930s as part of the WPA projects.
• The very first recordings of Native American music, song, and story, dating from 1890 and captured in wax.
• Original recordings of Woody Guthrie, Jelly Roll Morton, Leadbelly, and Robert Johnson. The first recording of Leadbelly's "Goodnight Irene" and "In the Pines."
• Turn-of-the-century recordings of African American spirituals, including the first recordings of the renowned Fisk Jubilee Singers.
• Voices of thousands of Americans from every state in the nation: cowboys telling tales and reciting poetry, farmers and fishermen and coal miners—all telling their unique stories.
• Recordings of Jewish immigrants to New York narrating their journeys and sounds of early klezmer music as it arrived in the New World.
• Thousands of glass and acetate recordings documenting the cultural legacy of Appalachia, the Southwest, and New England.
• Sounds of urban America: children in school yards, the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, and other singers and songwriters recorded for various federal documentary projects.

This is merely a partial listing of the vast audio holdings at the Library of Congress. The problem is that literally everything at the Library of Congress and the American Folklife Center is endangered. Materials are deteriorating faster than they can be transferred to more stable media. But the real tragedy is that there has been no consensus on the best methods and media for preservation. The only thing everyone in the cultural field agrees on is that there is no quick fix. We all are looking to you, the audio engineers, to unravel this puzzle and create a new medium—quickly.

As you can tell by now, as the director of the American Folklife Center I am not an engineer. In fact, I have only minimal knowledge of things mechanical, electrical, or technical. I am a folklorist, and for you, the audio engineers, I am good news and bad news. The good news is that I am your end user, your customer; I have the content. The bad news is that I, like most archivists, am looking for the unattainable. It was pointed out to me that my quest is similar to the quest for the Holy Grail. While I was reproaching the audio engineering community for not having developed a product to serve me well, I had to realize that I was not even asking the right questions. My original intent was to raise the banner and put out the call for what we need—a recording medium that will last and provide essential preservation to the aural record of the nation and, ultimately, the world. Needless to say, not only did I find out that this search for the indestructible and immortal sound medium is fruitless, but more than that, it is missing the point entirely. I am just the tip of the iceberg, and I am not alone in my ignorance. Many of the most important sound collections are curated by folks like me, who still are searching for a stable sound medium, rather than looking toward methods of migration and organization that will ensure access to our recordings well into the future. We need the audio community to work with us on this effort.

Our audio tape, as you all know too well, will last only about 10 to 60 years. But there are many other problems we ethnographers and archivists face:

• At the Library of Congress, over 100 wax cylinders documenting many of the earliest recordings are currently unplayable without careful restoration.
• About 500 recordings documenting early ragtime and the beginning of blues and gospel music on wire, aluminum discs, and other obsolete media are damaged.
• About 4000 glass and acetate masters have cracks, deformities, and scratches that need repair, including the first ever recording of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."
• The largest collection in the world of unpublished and published recordings of Duke Ellington needs preservation treatment.
• About 6000 audio tapes from the 1940s and 1950s are

drying out and crumbling, with material recorded in the 1970s and 1980s suffering from the dreaded "sticky shed" syndrome. This includes material documenting the American civil rights movement and the U.S. bicentennial celebration.

The question is not whether to migrate these priceless recordings to another medium, the question is what medium, and how long do we have before we must migrate again. At the sound archives around the world we are only just now beginning to address the problem. We need a solution from the engineering community that will be possible, one that is cost-effective and not labor intensive.

The Library of Congress is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. There is a growing awareness by archivists, collectors, and the recording industry itself that preservation of sound is a worldwide problem. Some examples of initiatives that have been under way during the past few years in the United States include the following:

- In 1999 a report by the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations recognized that federal support for preserving these recordings is needed. The National Endowment for the Humanities, for the first time, includes a line item in their FY2000 budget specifically set aside for audio preservation and access at archives across the country.
- In the fall of 2000 Congress passed the Recorded Sound Preservation Registry Act, which directs the Library of Congress to appoint a committee of experts to identify and name twenty-five of the most endangered sound collections in the nation each year. These collections will be preserved as a demonstration of the need that exists throughout the country, and indeed the world. The registry will bring much needed attention to the plight of audio collections worldwide, as we all grapple with the task of preservation and digitization of these materials.
- In December 2000 the American Folklife Center partnered with the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Council on Library and Information Resources, the American Folklore Society, and the Society for Ethnomusicology to host a two-day symposium—Folk Heritage Collections in Crisis. Representatives from these societies, from preservation labs, from recording companies and the industry (RIAA and the Grammy® Foundation), and from key sound archives such as the Smithsonian, the University of Washington, Indiana University, UCLA, Columbia, and the New York Public Library grappled with some of these issues. An AES panel in September 2000 set the stage for our discussions at the Library of Congress, and subsequent panels at the American Library Association continued the dialogue.
- The American Folklife Center and the Smithsonian Institution’s Folklways Records have joined together, and we have received a grant of three-quarters of a million dollars, the Save America’s Treasures program, to be matched by a minimum of one million in private dollars. Save America’s Treasures is a joint initiative of the White House Millennium Council, the National Park Service, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This is the program that is preserving the Star Spangled Banner and the Lincoln Summer White House. Our request brings aural heritage into the picture. If fully funded, this project will allow us to begin the process of sound preservation of folk and roots music recordings at both the Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress.
- On another level, the Library of Congress is in the process of centralizing all of its storage and preservation of audio and visual holdings in a new facility in Culpepper, VA. A 140,000-square-foot building, formerly occupied by the Federal Reserve Bank and built into the side of a mountain, will be refurbished and modified into the state-of-the-art National Audiovisual Conservation Center.

In anticipation of all of these significant efforts to preserve our sound, we, the content specialists, the fieldworkers, the collectors, and the archivists, are all looking to you, the sound engineers, to provide a more cost-effective, stable preservation medium; guidelines for preserving our sound holdings; and national standards that we should meet. I look forward to working with the Audio Engineering Society, as we look to the future of sound and our role to preserve the aural past for generations to come.

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