

Consider This! Providing Access to Archival Sound Collections

A Transcription Disc Example

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Problem

According to a survey of 99 North American libraries conducted by the Association of Research Libraries¹, 37% of audio resources are hidden. Many of these sound recordings contain unique content, but exposing these collections can be a monumental undertaking in terms of time, effort, and money. Several factors contribute to this problem, including:

- Major preservation issues that need to be addressed
- Requires special equipment, training, and skills
- Often lacks accompanying textual information
- May require auditioning
- Delivery of data may not be ideal

¹Judith M. Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey*. Sponsored by the ARL Research Libraries Committee, ARL, Washington, DC, 2002.

Project Background

Established in 1987, the Marr Sound Archives contain over 300,000 pre-digital recordings focused on the American experience.

In 1998, the Marr Sound Archives received a collection of 10,000 16-inch transcription discs from J. David Goldin, a former radio personality and avid collector. The discs feature news, politics, health, science, religion, music, drama, and much more from the 1930's through the 1950's.

In 2008, the Miller Nichols Library at the University of Missouri-Kansas City was the recipient of a three-year \$502,000 Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant to catalog the 10,000 16-inch transcription discs that make up the J. David Goldin Collection.

- Grant period: January 2008-December 2010
- 1.0 FTE Cataloger, 3.0 FTE staff, and 0.75 FTE graduate student assistants hired to provide access to the collection.

What are transcription discs?

- A recording format, widely used by radio stations and networks, that was developed in the 1930's and used into the late 1950's.
- Can hold ca. 15 minutes of recorded sound per side.
- Ranges in size but are typically 16 inches in diameter and cut at 33 1/3 rpm requiring a custom turntable with a special tone arm for playback.
- Two varieties: (1) Instantaneous-cut discs made with an aluminum core or glass base coated with lacquer, and (2) plastic pressings.
- Glass-based lacquer discs were used during World War II as a temporary replacement for aluminum-core discs which were being recycled for military use.

Considerations

THE STABILITY OF THE FORMAT

CONSIDER...

The stability of the format

Consult the appropriate resources to determine the stability of the format.

- Are there chemical reactions that occur over time that result in deterioration?
- What are the visible indicators to assist in determining the stage of deterioration?
- If auditioning is required, will the fidelity of sound be compromised with each playback?

Spot check your collection to determine its condition.

- Are enough items affected to justify a formal preservation survey or can the issue be addressed within the regular cataloging workflow?

Take action.

- Establish your priorities.
- Determine whether additional funding should be pursued in order to acquire staff time and special equipment.

The stability of the format

Actions Taken

- Glass-based lacquers: In Jan. 2009, Marr staff began handling the complete digital transfer, image capture of labels, re-sleeving, and storage of all discs.
- Aluminum-core lacquers: Palmitic acid issue was first noted on Jan. 28, 2009.
 - Consulted audio preservation best practices, technical reports, and experts.
 - Mar.-Apr. 2009: Conducted a preservation survey identifying 775 discs that needed cleaning and digital transfer.
 - Late May 2009: Allotted staff time and money towards cleaning the affected discs, digitally transferring the audio, and acquiring special equipment.
- Pressings cleaned as needed and re-sleeved.

OUTCOMES...

The stability of the format

Positives and Negatives

- + By Nov. 2009, all glass-based lacquers were digitally transferred to CD.
- + As of Feb. 28, 2010, 78% of the most affected aluminum-core lacquers have been cleaned and 62% have been digitally transferred.
- Approximately 65% of all aluminum-core lacquers were not treated.
- Addressing the preservation issues cut into the core of the cataloging project in terms of time which contributed to a mounting backlog for the Special Project Cataloger.

Considerations

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE ISSUING BODY

CONSIDER...

The objective of the issuing body

Determine the objective(s) of the issuing bodies for the items in your collection.

- Do the recordings come from a variety of sources with a variety of objectives, and if so, how does that generally affect the level of detail issued with the item?
- Will the source of the recordings affect the time commitment needed to provide access?

Determine what resources are available to provide access.

- What special skills, knowledge, and supplementary resources are needed?
- What special equipment is needed and will it have to be acquired?

Take action.

- Determine priorities and needs based on the available information and resources.
- Develop guidelines that will address the varying levels of information available.

WHAT WE DID...

The objective of the issuing body

Actions Taken

- Acquired two custom turntables for students and staff to audition discs lacking detailed information in order to transcribe all pertinent data for access.
- Gathered sources of information including donor's inventory forms, donor's website, the physical disc, the transcribed data (if applicable), reference sources for radio programs (both in print and online)
- Allotted staff time equivalent to the level of detail provided with the item, e.g., full audition for discs lacking labels and spot checking for discs with detailed labels.

OUTCOMES...

The objective of the issuing body

Positives and Negatives

- + Guidelines developed and posted to the library wiki to help guide future projects.
- + Staff became adept at pulling together disparate pieces of information.
- Irregularly-paced workflow due to a dependence on the order of discs determined by the donor, e.g., runs of discs with detailed labels and runs of discs needing full audition.

Considerations

**THE MOST APPROPRIATE
DELIVERY PLATFORM**

CONSIDER...

The most appropriate delivery platform

Determine the most ideal platform to provide access to your materials.

- Identify your user base and determine what kind of specialized details are necessary for access.

Determine the barriers to providing the ideal platform.

- Are there any legal considerations?
- Are staff resources limited?
- Are you limited to the existing digital architecture available at your institution?
- Do you have the necessary infrastructure support to pursue the ideal platform?

Take action.

- Establish your priorities to determine what compromises, if any, must be made.
- Determine if additional funding should be pursued.

WHAT WE DID...

The most appropriate delivery platform

Actions Taken

Noted Barriers

- Existing architecture available at UMKC University Libraries was limited to the shared catalog and the ability to create multimedia web pages.
- Digital collection management system not pursued due to lack of funding and administrative support to acquire and maintain the platform.
- Copyright restrictions prevent the option of embedding audio.

Decision

- Provide full bibliographic access to all materials using the existing architecture, uploading the MARC bibliographic records to OCLC WorldCat and exporting them into the local shared catalog.

OUTCOMES...

The most appropriate delivery platform

Positives and Negatives

- + Minimized time spent on setup and training while maximizing the availability of knowledgeable resources about the platform.
- +/- Users seemed unaware of the addition of the Goldin Collection. In an effort to generate awareness of the collection, a blog was created and guest lectures were given highlighting its contents. In addition, the Special Project Cataloger created a project wiki which holds all pertinent project documents.

Considerations

**HOW TO MAINTAIN
THE INTEGRITY OF THE CATALOG
WHEN TRANSCRIBING BY AUDITION**

CONSIDER...

How to maintain the integrity of the catalog when transcribing by audition

Identify the information need.

- Spelling issue or language issue or both?
- For items lacking titles, how can you provide a title?
- Issues with identification of official song titles or of composers' works?

Consult the most appropriate resources to address the information need.

- Spelling issues: Perform a Google or WorldCat Boolean search with known information.
- Providing titles for items lacking titles: Audition the recording; use authoritative sources.
- Identifying official song titles: Search Google or other resources with known lyrics.
- Identify the need for specialized knowledge, e.g., languages, subjects, etc.

Set parameters.

- Set limits and provide guidelines on time and effort expended in searching for information.

WHAT WE DID...

How to maintain the integrity of the catalog when transcribing by audition

Actions Taken

- Identified and hired staff with specialized skills.
- Shared links to authoritative online resources via the project's wiki and acquired appropriate print resources.
- Trained staff on creative search strategies to determine spellings and song titles.
- Created guidelines for students and staff on determining which names and/or titles to transcribe for providing relevant access points.
- Created guidelines to address amount of time spent on searching and on actions needed when the data could not be determined.
- Additional outside training for staff members on the creation of name authority records.

OUTCOMES...

How to maintain the integrity of the catalog when transcribing by audition

Positives and Negatives

- + Guidelines and strategies available for future work on archival sound formats requiring audition.
- + As of Feb. 28, 2010, over 1,000 name authority records have been added to the National Authority File (NAF).
- The initiative to add authorized access to names has contributed to being slightly behind on the progress needed to successfully meet the project deadline.

What We Learned

- Due to shorter life cycles and the unique chemical make-up of audio formats, you must survey the condition of the collection before proceeding with cataloging.
- Archival sound collections contain a “mixed bag” of accompanying information often relying heavily on extra digging such as searching reference sources or auditioning the recordings. Make sure the appropriate amount of time is allotted to properly address these issues.
- When using existing architecture to provide access to an archival sound collection, you should aim for the ideal platform, but ultimately select the platform that considers *the realities and the possibilities* of your situation.
- When transcribing names, song titles, and program titles from audition, maintaining the integrity of the catalog can be difficult and time-consuming. Make sure you develop key search strategies, set parameters, and develop guidelines to address instances when the information cannot be determined.

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