

## THE ARTIFACTS OF RECORDING HISTORY:

CREATORS, USERS, LOSERS, KEEPERS

by  
Tim Brooks

### INTRODUCTION

The first commercial phonograph records were put on sale in 1889, in the form of wax cylinders. They did not begin to have wide distribution, certainly not to private homes, until the middle of the 1890's. Yet in 1898, the Phonoscope, which was an industry trade paper, carried the following item: "Old records are now in great demand, by enthusiasts who aim to possess valuable collections."

Even earlier than that, in 1897, the same paper reported on a Mr. Edgar Caypless of Denver, Colorado, who had accumulated a collection of 1,760 records. Other private collections of hundreds, and even thousands, of cylinder records were reported fairly regularly in the early 1900's. One gentleman in Detroit in 1903 was said to have more than 3,000 records including most of the Bettinis.

In case you're thinking of tracking down that great horde of wax treasures from 1897, you should know that Mr. Caypless derived great pleasure from playing his cylinders not only forwards but backwards. He said, "You get some very funny effects from this." No doubt it helped wear them out rather quickly too.

It seems that large collections of sound recordings were in existence even in the 1890's. But preservation was, and is, another matter. Preservation and dissemination of historic recordings, and the information regarding those recordings, are two of the basic purposes of this association. We are often berating, or cajoling, various institutions such as record companies and public libraries to do more in this regard.

I would like to suggest that good intentions start at home. There is more that we ourselves could be doing in some respects. We have in this association both private collectors and professional archivists. Each group has some very important functions it can serve in both preservation and dissemination.

First, let me back up a bit, and describe some of these "artifacts" -- the original recordings, as well as the catalogs, printed literature, and company files. I'll describe for you what I've been able to learn about what and where they are, and how they are being used by researchers and collectors today.

Editor's Note: Adapted from a talk given at the 13th Annual Convention of the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, Chicago, 3 May 1979.

### THE CREATORS

The creators of recording history are, of course, the commercial record companies. Their documents consist of both the recordings themselves, and the written files and printed matter pertaining to them. The companies create this material, for very crass reasons--to make money, as much of it and as fast as possible. It is hardly a concern of RCA or Columbia that their files might be of value to historians in future generations, or even intelligible to them. The files are simply an internal management device. The master recordings themselves are a source of potential profit to the company--an asset on the ledger book, as it were. Yet the large recording companies are not necessarily antithetical to the concerns of the scholar. In New York I have personally made extensive use of the archives at both Columbia and RCA Victor. Both have been cooperative--on an informal basis--in allowing access to recording information, so long as such access did not interfere with their current operations.

Neither company is interested in supporting such research, however, either directly or indirectly through maintenance of library-type facilities for researchers. There is no economic incentive for them to do so. Both companies maintain their recording files, which date back to the turn of the century, under the aegis of a Listing Department whose primary function is to prepare label copy for current releases or maintain files of those releases. So at both offices you will find original recording ledgers and other early files in the midst of a current work area. There are no trained archivists at either company, nor anyone particularly familiar with the early files, although some of the people there have picked up a general knowledge of file formats simply by exposure to them.

Fortunately both archives are in the hands of people who have a self-generated concern for their preservation. They do try to protect them as best they can from needless deterioration. Hopefully this irreplaceable documentation of recording history will one day be placed into a proper archival setting, either company-supported, or more likely public.

Incidentally, neither company has complete files. Columbia has no information whatever on the thousands of cylinders it produced in the 1890's and early 1900's, and information on its early discs is also very spotty. Victor is in better shape, but there too there are gaps.

Portions of both the Columbia and Victor files have been microfilmed, but in neither case was the work satisfactory. There are many tiny codes and colored inks used on the cards, as well as labels pasted to the backs of some. In many cases these simply did not reproduce. There is also a private project underway to publish a multi-volume set containing the complete recording data of Victor from 1900 onwards. The authors of this enormous, and so far unfunded, project are Ted Fagan and William Moran of Stanford University.

In any event, there is a continuing danger that because "something" has been printed or microfilmed, some company executive may decide to bury or destroy the original files in the interests of short term economy. There is the ever present danger that the entire archives at either company might one day be closed, packed away, made inaccessible or even destroyed, by some less enlightened future management.

### Recordings

As for the recordings, the companies take quite a different view. Information from the files is generally available, at least if you are a responsible researcher and if you are willing to go in and dig for it yourself. The recordings are not -- partly because they are considered proprietary to the company, and partly because it costs the company time and money to access them through acetate pressings and the like.

Due to the rather well-established primacy of commerce over culture in our society, the companies have the legal right to do pretty much as they please with our recorded heritage. This includes withholding it--that is, refusing to allow access to recordings--or even destroying it.

Fortunately their treatment of it is not usually that harsh, though there have been exceptions. For example, about ten years ago, a British society approached CBS with a request for permission to reissue material by the Georgians, a fine and neglected jazz group of the 1920's. Columbia consented but only with the express stipulation that the British LP's not be sold in the U.S. This was so that Columbia could market its own LP's here. But Columbia decided not to do so, presumably because the reissue wouldn't make enough money. So we were left with the bizarre situation where historic American recordings were available to anybody except Americans, and they were expressly forbidden to be sold here.

### Printed Matter

Besides creating recordings and the files concerning them, the commercial record companies have issued a wide range of printed material, catalogs, dealer lists, house magazines, and so forth. The first printed catalog was issued in 1890 by the North American Phonograph Company. Columbia began putting out regular catalogs later that same year. By the early 1900's there were many companies turning out catalogs and flyers, sometimes printing them in the hundreds of thousands. For example, Edison's New Phonogram magazine had a press run of around 300,000 in 1905.

Because these printed items were originally published in large quantities and distributed to the public, they tend to be more accessible to the researcher today than the master recordings or the files. Still, complete sets of catalogs and supplements are hard to find. Neither Columbia nor Victor have anywhere near a complete run of their own printed literature.

### The Users

So far I've talked about the creators of the artifacts of recording history, the record companies--what they have in their possession and what they do with it. Next we look at who is using these source materials.

Librarians and archivists should recognize that most serious users of recording source materials are not professionals in the music field, or even degree holders in the fields they are researching. To the best of my knowledge, there are no Ph.D's in discography. The user will very often be a professional in some other field altogether, either academic or business. A librarian, a Professor of Romance Languages, a former newsman, or a businessman. The quality of their work certainly varies, but it is sometimes very good by any standard. A great deal of important oral history, for example, is being gathered by non-professionals, especially in the fields of jazz and popular culture. Probably no area of cultural research is so "democratized" as that of recording history. This is a fact which should be borne in mind in the operations of any archive housing recording history artifacts.

As an extension of the fact that much of the serious research is being done by non-professionals, it is also true that the publications in which their work appears are not usually going to look like scholarly journals. There is a small, mimeographed magazine put out by a school-teacher in Vermont, a hobby-oriented monthly from Brooklyn, which combines sales lists and articles, a publication called the Record Collector from England which is practically a one-man show, several jazz and contemporary rock publications which border on fan magazines. None of these might claim academic prestige in the usual sense, yet they often contain important and original research in the field of recording history. There is no pre-eminent national publication specializing in serious research in this field. Because of the scattered origin, irregular publication, and small scale of most of these journals, communication between researchers in different parts of the country is often rather poor.

And this is where both the archivists and private collectors among us can help a great deal. It is important for institutions to recognize the nature of this "underground press" and actively assist in its dissemination. This certainly isn't hard to do. Subscriptions to practically all of the jazz, popular and classical research publications of value would not cost very much.

I have prepared a list of publications containing worthwhile research which appears as an appendix to this article. It covers several fields of sound recording--the early acoustic era, classical recordings, jazz, country, even rock. The emphasis is on those publications which regularly print substantive and original research in their fields. There are 24 publications on the list. I wonder how many libraries carry all or even most of them.

I suggest that it should be the business of ARSC, and its individual members, to support and encourage those periodicals that do serious research into recording history. They are not in competition with us, or with the work done through our own Journal. They complement it. For our library members, that means stocking these publications on your shelves, at least the principal ones in each field; and encouraging other libraries with music divisions to do the same.

Gary-Gabriel Gisoni of the New York Public Library is the author of a very useful catalog of periodicals currently available at the five major ARSC member libraries, which appeared in a recent issue of our own Journal. One of the things that it showed was that, aside from the ARSC Journal itself, few of the principal research publications were available even at those five. Record Research is at four, the Journal of Country Music at two, Antique Phonograph Monthly at two, Old Time Music at three, The New Amberola Graphic at two. That last one, incidentally, costs all of \$4.00 for a two-year subscription.

There are about 17,000 libraries in the U.S., according to Bowker's. Yet most of the research journals, including our own, reach only a couple of dozen, or less. Obviously the public, even the interested collecting public, is not being reached very well.

As to the individual collector, how many of us follow more than one or two of the current journals, even those in our own special field of interest? The fact that the total circulation of most of these publications is only a few hundred copies each would suggest that most collectors don't. I urge readers to examine this list carefully and support the publications which cover their field of interest. They need your support.

It should be mentioned that the users of material dealing with recording history often build up their own libraries of source materials, of necessity, since so few public institutions have adequate resources in this area. In addition to periodicals, there is an ongoing and active market among collectors for original record catalogs, pamphlets, flyers, trade newspapers, dealer lists and such. Much of this is difficult or impossible to find in most libraries. Where originals cannot be had, Xeroxes and reprints are circulated. Even some internal company files are now in private hands, a notable example being the recording ledgers of the Gennett Company, a pioneer in jazz recordings in the 1920's.

Private collections of source materials are harder to locate and access than public archives, but they are an important and necessary resource for writers and researchers. I am encouraged by the project now underway to catalog and microfilm complete runs of record company literature, with the microfilms then being made available to other libraries. The more general availability of this material is a very important factor in facilitating research.

#### The "Losers"

So we have the creators, the record companies, and the users. Who

are the "losers" of the documents of recording history? Well, the very circumstances that have left so much unique material in private hands is bound to result in improper care or outright loss of both documents and recordings. I have seen extremely fragile documents, such as early printed flyers, disintegrating while in private collections. Most had never been properly photocopied. The situation is even worse as regards early recordings. Brown wax cylinders of the 1890's, which are among the earliest recordings in existence, are quite susceptible to temperature changes and humidity as well as to breakage. Some very interesting material still exists in this format which would bear on the study of American folkways of that era. I have heard such things as contemporary recordings of small town band concerts, examples of long unused styles of singing and speech, humor, politically-related items and the like. These recordings were produced in small quantities in the first place, and many if not most of the surviving examples are probably unique. Every year we lose a few more of them to mildew and breakage. Very few of these primitive recordings have been taped, and a small percentage of those have been taped properly. An infinitesimal percent--perhaps one or two dozen selections altogether--have ever been disseminated in LP form.

Think about that for a moment. Of our entire recorded heritage of the 1890's--perhaps, as a guess, ten thousand items still in existence--a couple of dozen are available to scholars.

Let me pass along one illustration of the academic neglect of this most fragile era of recording. The Rockefeller Foundation recently funded a project called New World Records, with a grant of several million dollars. Its commission was to preserve on LP, for students and the public, a sampling of American musical history. It was to use authentic recordings wherever possible. But when the LP's dealing with the 1890's came out, everything on them had been recreated. Even with its lavish funding and scholarly purpose, New World chose to preserve nothing authentic from the first decade of commercial recording. When I asked an official of the organization why this was so, she said that it was "too much bother" for them to use the real thing. And so another chance was lost.

I don't mean to imply that the gradual loss of our earliest recordings is the fault of the private collector. In many cases private collectors have in fact saved irreplaceable material from even more imminent destruction. But private collectors are not trained in archival preservation techniques, nor would they have the time or money to implement them if they were.

A greater attention of public archives to the remaining recordings of the 1890-1900 era would be a very desirable goal--for example, a taping program of whatever is left in public and private hands.

To sum up, unlike rare paintings or books, early recordings tend to fare rather poorly in private hands--just by their nature. Much has

been lost already. I would venture to guess that of that portion of our aural heritage of the 1890's which remains in private hands, virtually nothing may survive to the year 2000.

The Keepers

As for my final category, the keepers, they are implied by the foregoing. In the sense that I mean it, that of preservers, the keepers will have to be our public, professional archives and libraries. It certainly is not going to be the creators, the record companies, who have shown little commitment to any program of preservation, other than that of their current profits. It cannot be the private collectors, who are least equipped to preserve or disseminate archival materials.

Some institutions, including those affiliated with ARSC, are doing pioneering work in the field of preservation and dissemination. I would hope that both the institutional and individual members of ARSC will pay particular attention to the first decade of recorded sound, which is about to disappear while in our hands, if we do not act quickly to make a permanent transfer of the surviving recordings. Sooner than you think, there may be nothing left to preserve.

And as regards the other major purpose of ARSC, dissemination, we can individually and collectively do much to support and spread the serious, specialist journals which are struggling in this country. They are not contrary to our interests, they are consonant with them.

It may be that Mr. Cayless's fabulous collection of brown wax cylinders from 1897 and earlier, is by now gone forever. Along with the complete set of Bettini's which the Detroit gentleman had accumulated in 1903. Let's hope that in the year 2000 we aren't looking back on what was lost that we still had in 1979.

SOME LEADING PUBLICATIONS

	<u>Among Five ARSC Libraries</u>
<u>The Acoustic Era</u>	
Antique Phonograph Monthly	2
Hillandale News	4
New Amberola Graphic	2
Talking Machine Review Int'l	3?
<u>Classical</u>	
The Record Collector	5
Recorded Sound	5
<u>Jazz/Blues</u>	
Journal of Jazz Studies	4
Storyville	?

SOME LEADING PUBLICATIONS (Cont.)

<u>Country/Folk</u>	<u>Among Five ARSC Libraries</u>
J.E.M.F. Quarterly	4
Journal of Country Music	2
Old Time Music	3
<u>Rock</u>	
Goldmine	?
Popular Music and Society	?
<u>General</u>	
Record Research	4
Kastlemusick Monthly Bulletin	?

PUBLICATIONS CONTAINING SUBSTANTIVE RESEARCH  
INTO PHONOGRAPH AND RECORD HISTORY

Compiled by Tim Brooks

While the following list does not purport to be complete, it does cover the principal journals containing serious research into recording history. Any individual or library seriously interested in the field should follow (or stock) these, according to their specialty. Excluded are publications which are primarily sales lists, fan magazines or contemporary in nature (although these too have occasional articles of interest). The number in parantheses (#--) indicates the highest issue thus far.

The Antique Phonograph Monthly

Allen Koenigsberg, Editor  
650 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11226  
(Irregular. \$8.00/10 issues). (Vol. 6, No. 1)  
Early history of phonographs and recordings, primarily acoustic.  
Meticulously researched.

Association For Recorded Sound Collections Journal

Les Waffan, Executive Secretary, A.R.S.C.  
P.O.Box 1643, Manassas, VA 22110  
(3 issues per year, \$10/year). (Vol. X/#3)  
Serious articles on early recordings, discographies, etc.

Cadence

Bob Rusch, Editor  
Route 1, Box 345, Redwood, NY 13679  
(12 issues per volume, \$8.00/volume). (Vol. II/#12)  
"The American Review of Jazz and Blues." Primarily oral history, current LP reissues.

#### Footnote

Terry Dash, Editor

44 High Street, Meldreth, Royston, Hertfordshire, England SG8 6JU  
(Bimonthly, \$6/year surface, \$9/year airmail) (Vol. X/#6)  
"Dedicated to New Orleans Music," with some discographies.  
Current LP reissues.

#### Goldmine

Rick Whitesell, Editor

PO Box 187, Fraser, MICH 48026

(Monthly, \$12/year) (#40)

Rock history (all facets); biographies, discographies. Fast becoming the leading journal in this field. Also publishes an enormous record auction supplement.

#### The Gunn Report

John Gunn, Editor

15 Lynton Road, Hadleigh, Benfleet, Essex, England SS7 2QG

(Bimonthly, 2.60/year surface, 4.60/year airmail) (#73)

Primarily English recording history, with emphasis on 20's, 30's and 40's. Large auction.

#### The Hillandale News

City of London Phonograph & Gramophone Society

B. A. Williamson, Hon. Treasurer

157, Childwall Valley Road, Liverpool, England L16 1LA

(Bimonthly, \$8/year surface, \$10/year airmail) (#109)

Early history of phonographs and recordings, especially European.

#### Hobbies

1006 So. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, ILL 60605

(Monthly, \$10/year) (Vol. 84/#9)

Although only one department in this large magazine concerns recordings, Jim Walsh's detailed articles--which have been running for 37 years--contain the most basic research being done on pioneer (acoustical) recording artists. Another department, by Lou Dumont, covers pioneer radio artists.

#### Jazz Report

Paul Affeldt, Editor

PO Box 476, 357 Leighton Drive, Ventura, CALIF 93001

(Irregular, \$5/6 issues, \$10/12 issues) (Vol. IX/#5)

Primarily oral history, current LP reissues. Mimeographed.

#### JEMF Quarterly

Norm Cohen, Editor

John Edwards Memorial Foundation

Folklore & Mythology Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CALIF 90024

(Quarterly, \$10/year individuals, \$11/year library) (#54)

Serious articles on folk and country music recording history.

#### Journal of Country Music

Kyle D. Young, Ed.

Country Music Foundation, 4 Music Square East, Nashville, TENN 37203

(3 issues per year, \$10 year) (Vol. VII/3)

Serious articles on country music history, some dealing with recordings.

#### Journal of Jazz Studies

Institute of Jazz Studies

Charles Nanry, David Cayer, Eds.

Transaction Periodicals Consortium, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ 08903

(Semi-annual, \$8/year) (Vol. V/#1)

Academic articles on jazz history; oral history; some discographical articles.

#### Kastlemusick Monthly Bulletin

Robert A. Hill, Editor

901 Washington Street, Wilmington, DEL 19801

(Monthly, \$9.84/year) (Vol. IV/#10)

Has expanded from original emphasis on collectible LP's to all eras of recording history.

#### The New Amberola Graphic

Martin Bryan, Editor

37 Caledonia Street, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819

(Quarterly, \$4.00/8 issues) (#30)

Modest in size and price, but contains some of the best research on the acoustic era.

#### Not Fade Away

Neil Foster, Ed.

16 Comiston Ave., Prescot, Mersyside, England L34 25W

(Irregular, £3.00/4 issues) (#14)

English rock publication, with emphasis on biography.

#### Old Time Music

Tony Russell, Editor

33 Brunswick Gardens, London, England W8 4AW

(Quarterly, \$6/year surface, \$9/year airmail) (#31)

Early country and folk music, with emphasis on U.S. artists and recordings. Many illustrations.

#### Paul's Record Magazine

Paul Bezanker, Editor

PO Box 14241, Hartford, CT 06114

(Irregular, \$11/6 issues) (#18)

Quite irregular, but contains some of the most extensive rock discographies. 100+ pages.

Popular Music & Society  
R. Serge Denisoff, Editor  
Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green,  
OHIO 43403  
(Semi-annual, \$7/year, \$6/year student) (Vol. VI/#4)  
Academic articles on popular music (mainly rock); occasionally  
deals with recordings.

The Record Collector  
James F. E. Dennis, Editor  
17 St. Nicholas Street, Ipswich, Suffolk, England  
(Monthly, \$9/year) (Vol. 24/#12)  
Articles and discographies dealing with early classical vocal  
recordings.

Record Exchanger  
Art Turco, Pub.  
PO Box 6144, Orange, CALIF 92667  
(Irregular, \$7.50/6 issues) (#27)  
A leading publication on rock history with artist biographies, etc.  
Includes large auction.

Record Research  
Len Kunstadt, Editor  
65 Grand Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11205  
(Bimonthly, \$5/10 issues) (#168)  
The leading popular research publication, covering all eras of  
recording (pre-rock).

Recorded Sound  
British Institute of Recorded Sound  
29 Exhibition Road, London S.W.7, England  
(Quarterly, \$12/year) (#73)  
Articles and discographies, primarily concerning classical artists.

Storyville  
Laurie Wright, Editor  
66, Fairview Drive, Chigwell, Essex, England IG7 6HS  
(Bimonthly, \$6/year surface, \$9/year airmail) (#84)

The Talking Machine Review International  
Ernie Bayly, Editor  
19. Glendale Road, Bournemouth, England BH6 4JA  
(Bimonthly, \$5.50/year surface, \$10/year airmail) (#57)  
Early history of phonographs and recording, especially European.

Time Barrier Express  
Ralph Newman, Editor  
PO Box 206, Yonkers, NY 10710  
(Bimonthly, \$9/year) (#25)  
One of the better publications concerned with rock history, disco-  
graphy.