APPRAISAL OF SOUND RECORDINGS FOR TEXTUAL ARCHIVISTS

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ABSTRACT: As the twentieth century draws to a close, archivists are finding that audio recordings constitute a greater percentage of potential collections than ever before. Although audio materials do present a number of special concerns that require careful evaluation, archivists who are familiar with traditional, manuscript and text-oriented appraisal methodologies will find that the most fundamental elements apply to audio recordings as well.

A phone rings in a cluttered office cubicle, and the archivist who answers hears a familiar question:

“I’m the University Archivist at my institution, and a faculty member wants me to accept his collection of phonograph records. Some of them look really old and valuable. How do I know if they’re worth adding to the archives?”

“What do you mean, you don’t think my 200-reel collection of off-air recordings of TV movie soundtracks is appropriate for your collection? I really enjoyed making these tapes, and I’m sure they’re valuable. You could make copies for film students to use. Blind people could use them; blind people can’t see the pictures anyway.”

“My late husband made a lot of off-air tapes of radio programs. No, I don’t know anything about what’s on the tapes, and the boxes aren’t labeled, but I’m sure they’re important or he wouldn’t have made them. I’ve already called five libraries, and nobody will talk to me about them. I want to donate them to a library and take a tax deduction. May I send them to you?”

“My archives has a collection of radio broadcast tapes that numbers about 1,000 reels. They are of programs that feature an alumnus who had a broadcasting career for about 20 years. We don’t know exactly what’s on the tapes, but they’re a little bit moldy, so we know we need to preserve them. Can you tell us whom to send them to, and how much it will cost? Do you think one of our work-study students can handle this by copying them to cassette for us?”
The Special Collections Department at Georgia State University’s Pullen Library, itself the repository for a large recorded sound collection, including a phonodisc library and radio broadcast recordings, frequently receives questions like these from other repositories and from prospective donors. Such callers often ask how to tell whether a collection of sound recordings is appropriate for their archives, question why certain recordings might not have value for certain archives, or wonder how to preserve sound recordings that have already been accessioned, an undertaking that usually requires reappraisal and priority-setting before reformatting begins.

Over the past several years, the number of appraisal-related calls received at GSU has increased noticeably. One reason for this is the increasing obsolescence of grooved phonodiscs (the “45s,” “78s,” and “LPs” so familiar to adults over the age of 30), which is leading more individuals to offer their personal collections to libraries and archives. Another is the natural increase in recordable media (especially magnetic tape) deposited in archives as holdings begin to include more collections dating from the 1960s and later, when conferences, meetings, and interviews were more likely to be recorded. A third reason is the very high cost of long-term preservation of noncommercial recordings. The vulnerability of tape and instantaneous disc formats to early failure, combined with the high costs of engineering time, the difficulty of procuring qualified technical assistance, and the lack of archivally-appropriate transfer media frequently take archivists and their administrators by surprise, and sometimes lead them to reappraise their holdings before proceeding.

Given that the quantity of media materials in archives will undoubtedly continue to grow in coming years, the number of obsolete formats will increase, and the costs and complexity of preservation will not decrease any time soon, the appraisal and reappraisal of recorded sound holdings become more important. Which recordings, of the variety that may be offered, does an archives wish to acquire? How many of what forms can an archives afford to preserve? To what extent do traditional appraisal methodologies offer guidance for appraisal of sound recordings? Which selection criteria developed for use in specialized sound archives can be borrowed or adapted for use in traditional, text- and paper-based repositories?

The calls received at GSU indicate that archivists who work at traditional, manuscript-oriented institutions struggle with several separate issues regarding appraisal of audio recordings. They are unfamiliar with the appraisal criteria used by sound archivists, and do not know if appraisal methods usually used with textual materials are pertinent; they find the wide variety of historical audio formats unfamiliar and confusing; they do not understand the types of information that might be found in the recordings they are offered; and they do not understand what resources will be needed to process, preserve, and access them.

Although most of the published discussion of audio appraisal dates only from the 1980s, and much work remains to be done regarding the development of audio appraisal and reappraisal criteria, this author believes that the papers and guidelines published to date provide enough information for archivists and manuscripts curators to make appropriate decisions regarding audio materials that they are offered. By reviewing the formats and types of recordings that are most often offered to archives and taking some time to review the most salient points of audio appraisal literature, most
textual archivists should be able to do a respectable job of appraising most of the sound recordings that come their way.

**An Overview of Audio Recordings: Categories, Forms, and Types**

The nonspecialist can approach the subject of sound recording identification in a number of ways, and the outline provided here is not suggested as necessarily the best or only way to go about the work. However, the following three points, foreign to the thinking of most manuscript archivists, will need to be addressed, and so this author suggests that novices determine these things before attempting an appraisal decision: the “category” of the recordings (commercial or noncommercial); the “form” of recordings; and the “type” of the recordings (“type” in this instance means the kind of information captured on the recordings). These three elements will permit the archivist to make a reasonable guess at the uniqueness of the material, its informational content, and the long-term costs of accessing and preserving it, all of which are important elements in any appraisal action.

**Categories: “Commercial” and “Noncommercial”**

The two broadest categories of recordings that archivists will want to keep in mind when examining collections are “commercial recordings” and “noncommercial recordings.”

“Commercial recordings” are not, as may be thought, recordings of commercials or advertising. Rather, they are recordings that have been mass-produced for sale or distribution to the public. This category includes all of the kinds of recordings that can be purchased in stores: popular and classical music, theater, spoken word, children’s stories, folk music, film scores, storytellers, sound effects, relaxation tapes, books on tape, sounds of animals, etc., providing that the recordings were created and mass-produced for the marketplace. Such recordings are analogous to books: they are conceived and executed by a person or team of people, given titles and issue numbers, advertised, and sent to stores or dealers for purchase. The forms of recordings distributed in this manner can include grooved discs (phonograph records), magnetic tapes, CDs, etc. The recordings may have special value as collectibles, or become rare due to attrition of the numbers that were originally published (in much the same way that some books become collectible or rare), but they remain commercial, mass-produced products nonetheless.

Some archives routinely collect commercial recordings and others do not: the commercial or noncommercial nature of a given collection is not a universal deciding factor. Commercial recordings may be very important for a collection, for instance, by documenting how a donor or historic figure sounded, or having been integral to the research carried out by a person whose papers the archives holds. But they are not usually unique and can often be replaced if they are lost or damaged and, consequently, are usually evaluated differently than most manuscript materials.

“Noncommercial” recordings include unique or nearly unique materials that are not mass-produced for sale. This category can include recordings of most of the subject
matter listed above, as well as recordings of events (conferences, hearings, court proceedings, political campaigns), dictation/note-taking aids, field recordings, oral histories, broadcasts, etc. As with commercial products, virtually all forms of recordings can be represented, including grooved discs, magnetic recordings, recordable CDs, and such less-common media as dictation belts and discs. These recordings can exist in multiple copies, but usually only in very limited quantities. This category can also include the masters, stampers, and other elements used to manufacture commercial audio products. By definition, however, these recordings are not "published" or mass-produced for public consumption.

Manuscript repositories will not wish to acquire noncommercial recordings simply because they are unique or nearly unique. They may, however, want to carefully examine noncommercial items that appear to complement the institution's holdings, because such recordings are more likely than commercial products to contain unique information. These materials more nearly fit the usual concept of "primary resources" than do commercial recordings, and can provide important information in ways that other forms of documentation cannot. However, they also—by virtue of usually being unique and recorded on short-lived media—present potential preservation costs that should not be underestimated. Since they cannot be replaced (as commercial recordings often can), the repository is more likely to feel obliged to make sure that they are preserved once accessioned, and preservation usually involves reformatting, a time-consuming and expensive undertaking.

Forms: Grooved Phonodiscs and Magnetic Tape

It is important for archivists to clearly identify the forms of the recordings they are offered because this information will tell them: (a) the types of equipment they will have to obtain in order to process the recordings and make them available, and (b) the anticipated life expectancy and preservation requirements of the recordings. These two elements can add up to a large investment of time and money, something that repositories should be aware of and weigh carefully at the time of the initial appraisal.

Historically, the variety of recording forms that have been invented is astonishing. There is a considerable amount of literature available to help archivists learn to identify historic recording formats and a fair, though often difficult, body of literature relating to preservation. The best single "snapshot" overview of both obsolete and current audio formats can be found in a chart listing recording types, sizes, and physical characteristics, which was published in Audio Preservation: A Planning Study—Final Report. By omitting both the most ancient and the rarest types of recordings documented on this chart, the list of forms of recordings that are, at present, most commonly offered to archives is reduced to two: grooved phonodiscs and magnetic tape.

A. Grooved phonodiscs ("phonograph records"): This form includes the "78s," "45s," and "LPs" that most middle-aged adults remember. These are stamped or pressed, are usually made primarily of shellac or vinyl-type materials, and are almost always commercial releases, although recordings are sometimes pressed in small
quantities for broadcasting, testing, or vanity purposes. They are not usually vulnerable to early failure. Commercial discs are fairly easy to identify: they almost always sport visually attractive printed labels containing the name of the record company and the issue number of the disc, the title of the work, the names of the writers, and the names of the performing artist(s). Albums (both LPs and loose-leaf albums of 78s) usually have illustrated jackets and many also have liner notes.

Another form of grooved phonodisc, called the “acetate,” “lacquer,” or “instantaneous disc,” is a noncommercial form, a recordable disc. This is a laminated product, a metal, glass or cardboard-base disc coated with plastic and manufactured blank for the purpose of being recorded by having grooves inscribed on its surface. While “acetates” can easily exist in multiple copies, the number of such copies is usually limited. They are distinguishable from commercial discs in several ways: (a) they usually lack printed labels with name of record company, issue number, etc. (although they frequently bear typed or handwritten labels, sometimes on previously printed forms); (b) they often have one or more stabilizer holes in addition to the spindle hole; (c) a metal or cardboard base is often visible at the spindle hole; and (d) they are sometimes translucent when held up to a light source (this applies to glass-based discs only). These discs usually require special playback equipment for access, especially if their diameter is greater than 12” or they were cut in the 1950s or earlier. The discs are considered to be inherently unstable, will eventually deteriorate to the point of failure and, therefore, require reformatting for long-term preservation.

In addition to acetates, archivists may also encounter dictation discs (small, floppy plastic phonograph records). These are a form of instantaneous disc. They require very specific equipment for playback and, lacking this equipment (or a newly-built equivalent), often cannot be “read.”

B. Magnetic tape: Magnetic tape in the form of audiocassettes and reel-to-reel tape should be familiar to most archivists. Cassettes most often range from 15 to 120 minutes in length. The open reels that commonly find their way to archives usually measure from 3" to 7" in diameter, although larger sizes can also be found, and playing times vary greatly according to the thickness and length of the tape and the recording speed and format used.

While most tape recordings that archivists encounter will contain noncommercial recordings, it is also quite possible to find commercial recordings in tape form. Commercial cassettes probably wouldn’t surprise archivists, nor 8-track tape cartridges (for those who remember the 1970s), but many are likely unaware or have forgotten that reel-to-reel recordings were also issued commercially years ago (mostly during the 1950s). Present-day magnetic formats include digital recordings in addition to the analog recordings of the past; digital tape forms include both reel-to-reel and digital audiocassettes (including
DAT/RD AT and other cassette forms). A variety of videotape formats is also used for digital audio recording. Although digital recordings present specific concerns relating to equipment and to format obsolescence, such concerns are not fundamentally different from the recording systems issues raised by all audio media; they are simply somewhat more urgent than has been true in the past.

All magnetic tape (whether recorded in analog or digital mode) will present preservation concerns in the form of deteriorating tape base, binder, or oxide, and will eventually have to be reformatted if the recordings must be preserved. Life-expectancy estimates vary from ten years (or less, depending on brand, date of manufacture, and storage and use environments) to 20, 50 or 60 years, as opposed to 50 years and up for many textual and paper-based records.

In sum, it is very important to accurately identify the forms of recordings that a collection contains before trying to complete an appraisal of the collection. For each form of recording acquired, the archives will need to supply appropriate storage space and supplies; to acquire (buy, borrow, or share with another institution) the equipment necessary to process the recordings and make them available; to train staff and patrons in handling and playback; and to supply the resources necessary to preserve those that are recorded on unstable media. Of the forms identified above, only commercial phonodiscs (shellac-type “78s” and vinyl-type “L Ps” and “45s”) are currently considered stable and capable of long-term preservation without reformatting.

Types of Recordings

Archives are offered recordings that were created or collected in any number of ways. For appraisal purposes, this author identifies eight types of recordings that archivists routinely encounter. The first type listed is equivalent to the first “category” (“commercial recordings”) identified above, while the remaining types are all “noncommercial” in nature.

1. Commercial recordings: Commercial recordings may be offered in the form of collections assembled by a collector, items suggested for acquisition on an individual basis, or items included in larger collections or record groups of largely textual materials. As mentioned above, such recordings are published materials, similar in many ways to books. They are not usually unique although they may be rare.

2. Recordings of events: Conferences, meetings, speeches, worship services, trials, legislative proceedings—all of these types of events generate recordings that are mostly spoken word, sometimes punctuated by sounds related to the location of the recording (clock chimes, cars, trains, birds, crowd noises, musical fanfares and excerpts, etc.). These are usually unique, and may complement textual information, although if they were recorded unselectively they may be cumbersome to use and not very informative.
3. Dictation recordings: Spoken word recordings usually made expressly for the purpose of aiding in the preparation of correspondence, minutes, or other textual materials. If the content is routine and was transcribed, the recordings are usually not valuable. On the other hand, dictation devices have been used, at times, for recording interviews and other nonroutine information, and such recordings, especially if they were not transcribed, may be of interest to an archives. Media may include grooved discs, grooved belts, and magnetic media. Equipment for playing older dictation media (grooved discs and belts in particular) is difficult to find.

4. Field recordings: “Live” recordings made “in the field” of peoples, music, animals, etc. These recordings are frequently created by researchers who possess subject-related expertise but not recording technology expertise, and are often made under adverse conditions. Fluctuations in power supply, media quality, storage conditions, and the technical skills of the recordists should be expected. Such recordings can be but are not always rare and valuable; due to the circumstances of their creation, they can be complicated and expensive to deal with.

5. Musical, theatrical, and artistic works: These are often, but not always, created for broadcast purposes or for eventual commercial release. They can include both rehearsals and final performances, and are often, but not always, recorded by skilled technicians.

6. Broadcast industry recordings: News; sports; musical, topical, and dramatic programming (daily, weekly, occasional); community events; public service announcements; talk radio; and advertising—the broadcasting industry produces both an abundance and a scarcity of recordings. Syndicated programs, for instance, can result in the creation of dozens of programs or more per year, depending on how frequently the shows are broadcast; newscasts, likewise, can result in large quantities of recordings, if they are recorded. The potential for scarcity lies in the fact that much material that is broadcast is aired live and not recorded at all, and other material, recorded on magnetic media, is lost when the medium is erased and reused. The recordings are usually of good quality when they originate with the broadcaster. Off-air recordings by hobbyists are more likely to vary in quality.

7. Home recordings: Correspondence ("voice letters"), home tapes of broadcasts, copies of commercial recordings, talks with friends and family, live music, etc.: the output of home recordists can be a bane or boon to an archives. While much of the hobbyist’s work is often of strictly personal value (such as personal listening tapes of commercial recordings), some home recordings capture broadcasts that were not recorded elsewhere, performances that were not supposed to be recorded, and similarly ephemeral materials. Legal issues are often a concern, as in the case of unauthorized "live” recordings or copies of material where the rights to the material are owned by another entity.
8. Oral histories: Created by researchers and archives, these recordings are usually unique and usually captured on tape. The quality of the recordings varies depending upon the type of equipment used and the skill of the recordist. Legal issues can be a concern, and recordings that lack releases from the interviewee and interviewer may present limitations of use.

To summarize, then, an archivist who has determined the categories, forms, and types of recordings that a collection holds is in good shape to continue with the appraisal process. Determining whether the recordings are commercial or noncommercial is a critical step, and may be the concluding step as well, if the institution does not accept commercial products. Knowing, in addition, whether the recordings are phonodiscs, tapes, or some other form, and how they were generated, and having a rough idea of what they contain allows the archivist to draw conclusions regarding the traditional appraisal elements of institutional relevance, age, and potential uniqueness, as well as the more particular qualities of medium specificity, potential use (and what will be needed to make them accessible), storage requirements, processing needs, and preservation concerns. Assessment of such additional elements as condition and quality will require both access to appropriate playback equipment and closer examination by a knowledgeable person.

**Appraisal Criteria for Audio Recordings**

Having determined the categories, forms, and types of recordings being considered, to what do archivists turn for advice on what to keep? They may wish to begin by reviewing their preferred manuscript appraisal guidelines and using those as a starting point. Most manuscript repositories are undoubtedly familiar with at least one appraisal theory or methodology, which they use to keep their traditional, paper-based holdings focused on their institution’s mission. Although such theories are almost universally expressed in terms of textual records, with occasional references to “special materials,” “special formats,” or “machine-readable records” added almost as an afterthought, the key elements expressed are still viable. In addition, archivists will want to review the criteria used by “sound archivists” to see what these specialists have to say.

Appraisal of audio archives, or “selection,” to use the sound archivists’ term, is a relatively new undertaking, documented much less completely than appraisal of manuscript and other textual materials. The key published works on the subject are a RAMP study on audio appraisal, authored by Helen Harrison, and a special publication, *Selection in Sound Archives*, issued by the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA). *Selection in Sound Archives*, which was edited by Ms. Harrison, includes papers by archivists from sound archives around the world, including the National Archives of the United States, the National Archives of Canada, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and others, many of which contain the collecting policies and selection criteria used at the authors’ institutions. These two works, and the most recent audiovisual guidelines published by the U.S. National Archives (NARA) form the basis for the following comments.
Reading through these documents, one is struck more by the similarities between the appraisal of manuscripts and of sound recordings than by the differences. In both cases, collections are evaluated in terms of such elements as relevance to the institutional mission, duplication of holdings, uniqueness, age, rarity, completeness, potential for future use, limitations on use, and condition. None of these criteria should be news to archivists of textual materials. On the other hand, we should not be surprised to find that what most distinguishes appraisal of sound recordings from appraisal of textual, paper-based records are such specifically audiovisual concerns as form, medium specificity, and audio quality, along with a greater emphasis on the importance of the accompanying documentation that aids the appraisal, processing, and accessing of machine-readable materials. Besides these differences, textual archivists will likely be startled by the sound archivists' much stronger concern regarding the costs of storing, processing, accessing and preserving audio materials and by their apparently much greater interest in the practice of reappraisal.

Three selection criteria that textual archivists may find both helpful and perhaps also difficult to assess are those relating to the medium specificity, form, and audio quality of the recordings. The criterion of "medium specificity" asks whether the information captured on the recording benefits by being in audio rather than textual or other form. "...[T]he concern here is that the sound recording actually has something to say over and above the printed word or official document...Medium specific qualities also apply to music recordings, as performances cannot be replaced by the printed music."13 Another author states the case somewhat more strongly: "We should restrict ourselves to records which contain medium-specific information. So many recordings of speeches by official persons...are in fact second-rate sources which do not add significantly to the knowledge stored in traditional archives of written and printed records."14 The criterion of medium specificity also bears on the issue of duplication of information, in that recordings that contain information that is also written or printed elsewhere may be duplicative rather than complementary sources.

"Form," as explained in detail above, has to do with the formats and media of the recordings being appraised (phonograph records, reel-to-reel tapes, cassette tapes, dictation discs, etc.). Format rarity and obsolescence contribute to high processing and access costs, while media that deteriorate quickly lead to high preservation costs. All of these concerns must eventually be incorporated into evaluation of the "costs of retention" of the materials, a criterion that is emphasized throughout the writings of sound archivists.

"Audio quality" is probably the hardest element to assess for an archivist not well acquainted with recording technology. While it certainly is not a deciding factor by itself, in that valuable content can be found on recordings that are recorded poorly and sound terrible, it does matter, particularly if the quality is so poor as to render the recording unintelligible. Evaluation of the audio quality of a recording requires considerable expertise; textual archivists would do well to hire or borrow experienced personnel to help with this part of the assessment.

In addition to medium specificity, form, and audio quality, documentation is a particularly important factor in the appraisal of sound materials. Because of the machine-readable nature of the materials, those that are unlabeled or poorly described when
they arrive at an archives are more difficult and costly to appraise and process. On the other hand, recordings that are accompanied by identifying information such as names, dates, places, recording format, speeds, etc., either attached to the recordings or included in accompanying materials, are easier and less expensive to appraise and process.

Sometimes archives are offered collections that are exceptionally large: not just a phonodisc or two, or a few tapes, but hundreds or thousands of recordings all created by the same organization or collected by the same person. In some cases, such collections contain items that are each, individually, of great value and deserving of retention, ranking high on all of the criteria noted above. More frequently, however, large collections contain: (a) recordings of mixed quality; (b) homogeneous runs or repetitive series of programming (especially common in broadcasting collections); (c) recordings that are not medium specific, containing information that would be at least as useful, perhaps more, if transcribed; or (d) recordings that fail to meet one or more of the relevant criteria. Must large audio collections be accepted as an all-or-nothing proposition? No.

Sound recordings, like textual records, can be weeded, sampled, or selectively accessioned to reduce bulk, bring the collection down to a manageable size, or highlight the most useful items while putting aside those that are marginal. If some recordings in a collection seem to meet the institution’s appraisal criteria while others do not, or if the collection is simply too big or repetitive to be functional, there is no reason not to select only that which is valuable to the archives and reject that which is not, providing the donor is amenable to dividing the collection.

For example, although much research still needs to be done regarding the development of criteria for sampling of audio materials, particularly in relation to broadcast collections, it is clear from the literature that sampling is currently practiced and accepted in the sound archives community. One author, writing in *Selection in Sound Archives*, quotes from the selection criteria of the Public Television Archives of the Public Broadcasting System: “‘with regard to program series, the Archives will generally preserve the first and final episodes and such other episodes as are necessary to document changes in plot, setting, characterization, technique, etc. In the case of daily series, a full week of programming will also be selected.’” Another describes the Public Archives of Canada’s efforts in the early 1980s to document radio broadcasting in Canada. These efforts included making ongoing arrangements for 15 private radio stations to capture one full day of programming on the same date; selecting 20 percent to 30 percent of the programs of a program exchange service operated by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters; and developing a working relationship with the public Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that allows the collecting of a sample, albeit a “more comprehensive” and “more thorough” sample, of the CBC’s output.

A more thorough reading of the available literature indicates that none of the major sound archives is attempting to save *everything* that is produced, particularly by broadcasting entities. Sampling of audio collections is more difficult at present than sampling of textual records, because of the non-eye-readable nature of the recordings, the lack of published discussion on sampling and other bulk reduction methods for audio holdings and, in many cases, uncertainty regarding the ultimate research use of sound
recordings. Nevertheless, given the short life expectancy of most noncommercial recordings and many commercial ones, bulk reduction is likely to occur over the course of time anyway, and the archivist's choice is to do this intentionally or to let nature take its course. It is this author's opinion, held more strongly with each passing year, that the vast majority of archives can afford to save only a relatively small percentage of the recordings they have already accessioned. If thoughtful sampling or weeding accomplished at or shortly after the time of initial appraisal helps focus institutional resources on recordings that will then be cared for properly, made accessible, and reformatted as needed, the result should justify the time and effort expended.

And this leads directly to an issue where textual and sound archivists may find themselves somewhat at odds. Several of the elements identified above (medium specificity, form, quality, and documentation) help archivists assess the cost of caring for, servicing, and preserving audio collections. Among archivists of textual materials, the practice of factoring the true costs of acquiring and maintaining materials into the appraisal decision is apparently not widespread. This reluctance to pay attention to what has been called the "costs-of-retention" factor has been attributed to the fact that in textual archives, many costs, such as processing and preservation, are postponable and, therefore, not of immediate concern to archivists.17

Sound recordings, on the other hand, are costly to deal with from the start, due to the need for playback equipment and special supplies, and the costs escalate rather than diminish as reformating needs are calculated. There is no doubt that the cost factor receives much more emphasis among audio archivists than among archivists of textual materials, probably because the costs of equipment, media, supplies and specialized staff represent a much higher percentage of an audio archives' budget. In the words of one author: "...it is critical that a fiscal assessment of the cost of accessioning, organising, and preserving the record is maintained. We must begin to attach price tags to selection decisions and such decisions should be documented for referral by future archivists...This applies to all records and will include conservation and storage costs."18

Similar comments appear throughout the writings of sound archivists. Evidently, their certainty that costs will outstrip budgets, their knowledge that the recordings are short-lived, and their understanding that the pace of indexing and reformating will necessarily be slow and backlog creating have led to a more widely-held conclusion that selectivity will serve their purposes better than unquestioning selection based, perhaps, on wishful thinking. One author, writing about the need for clear guidelines for initial appraisal of recordings, comments "...sometimes it is definitely better to pull oneself together and have the records thrown out or destroyed. If some archivists here or there still believe in miracles the author is the last one to awaken them from their dreams. However we can be very certain that the longer we wait, the less money will be available and the more our conscience will bother us."19 Indeed.

If sound archivists are so aware of the costs involved with caring for audio collections and, therefore, lean toward selectivity in the initial appraisal of recorded sound collections, one might reasonably ask what they recommend be done with collections of audio recordings that have already been accessioned, perhaps unselectively, by an archives. In the words of one author: "...[I]t is a necessity that we must consider reexamining, reappraising, and reevaluating sound recordings already accessioned and
sitting undisturbed and deteriorating on our shelves...let us face it, the longer they are there, they gain a cloak of respectability, they become old friends and we seldom think to question why they are there in the first place." Textual archivists may be surprised at the greater value that sound archivists appear to place on the practice of reappraisal of existing audio holdings; the papers and reports published to date indicate that reappraisal is viewed by sound archivists as an important part of maintaining recorded sound collections. In particular, a number of authors stress that reappraisal should precede major preservation efforts, to ensure that resources invested in expensive reformatting projects target recordings that are worthy of the investment. "The reappraisal suggestion is a healthy one for any recorded sound collection and should help to determine the priorities for preservation in different collections of sound recordings. It may be heretical to say so but all accessioned sound recordings...are not of equal value; why then should they be given equal preservation treatment or even equal storage space." Other authors suggest that reappraisal should also be carried out before existing collections are cataloged; given the time and resources required to index, catalog, or otherwise describe recordings in any detail, these authors want to be sure that the recordings are worthy of such attention before proceeding.

Judging by the number and nature of the audio-preservation-related calls received at GSU, this point of view may be difficult for some textual archivists to accept. Almost without exception, the archivists who call or write with questions about reformatting audio recordings express their intentions in terms of reformatting entire collections. To date, all of them, without exception, have been astonished to learn the complexity and cost of such projects. Whether this information leads them to reappraise their holdings and select a smaller number of high priority items for treatment is not known; it appears not, based on the number of callbacks received as institutions attempt to locate funding for their projects. Sound archivists, on the other hand, have known for years that there is no quick, cheap way to preserve audio recordings and, judging by their published literature, have come to accept that they do not have, and never will have, the resources to preserve marginal recordings or items that should probably be discarded but that are being kept "just in case" they may later be found useful.

Audio Appraisal Checklist

Having obtained basic information on audio recording categories, forms, and types and reviewed the specifically audio-related questions that sound archivists use in appraising and reappraising collections, manuscript archivists should be ready to proceed with their own appraisals of audio materials. Points that archivists will want to consider with regard to potential audio acquisitions include the following (culled and compiled from the sources identified above):

A. Relevance to institutional mission or collecting policy. This fundamental point is even more important when evaluating materials that require special shelving, supplies, equipment and expertise to index, access and preserve. If a recording or group of recordings is not directly relevant to the institution’s mission, the archivist has good reason to decline it.
There are varying degrees of relevance, however, and varying degrees of importance within and among collections deemed relevant. Hence, this criterion is one which archivists should revisit as they continue with their appraisal. Collections or items that are judged appropriate on the first pass may not appear as worthy of retention after being considered in light of their relationship to other materials and of the costs associated with retaining, processing, and preserving them.

B. Uniqueness/rarity: Are the recordings likely to be unique? Commercial recordings are usually not, while noncommercial recordings usually are. If the recordings are not unique, is there a reason this particular archives should have these particular copies? How many other archives or libraries are likely or known to have copies?

C. Duplication, both internal and external: Does this material duplicate either recordings or information already held by the institution or by a sister institution? Is the duplication of a direct, copy-for-copy nature? If so, are these copies better in some way than the others (better condition, documentation, recording quality)? If the recordings duplicate information held in another form, does the audio version possess qualities that a textual, electronic, or other version does not? Does the perceived duplication have the effect of supplementing the existing record, or is it merely redundant?

D. Medium specificity: Is the recorded content of the recordings best represented by an audio rather than a textual document? If not, is the information important enough that the institution wishes to have it transcribed? Music, animal and nature sounds, live performances, speeches by renowned orators—all of these are examples of material that usually benefits by being kept in recorded rather than in transcribed format.

E. Form: What form of recordings are these? Is the form one that is currently in use, or one that is or will soon be obsolete? Will the institution be able to acquire the equipment and expertise to access its content? Is the institution willing to do this? Is the medium robust or short-lived? Does this format require storage supplies other than those the institution usually uses?

F. Age: How old are the recordings? If they are recorded on vulnerable media, are they old enough to require prompt reformatting, or can preservation actions be postponed?

G. Condition: What kind of shape do the recordings appear to be in? Clean or dirty, worn or unplayed, stored appropriately in adequate containers (boxes, sleeves, etc.) or not? Shedding, cracked, cupped, curled? Can any apparent problems be resolved, or is the damage irreversible?
H. Quality/legibility: Does the audio quality appear to be good (this will require careful playback by a knowledgeable person)? If not, is the significance of the content great enough to override the poor quality?

I. Completeness: Do the recordings contain complete information, or are there gaps (intentional or otherwise)? Do series of recordings adequately document the event, person, performance, etc., that they are supposed to document, or are they too scattered in their coverage to be useful?

J. Documentation: Are the recordings documented, either individually or as part of a larger collection? Are dates, places, events, speakers, performers, etc., noted on storage enclosures, index sheets, labels, or other accompanying documentation? If the recordings are part of a larger, mixed-media collection, is there information in the rest of the collection that helps explain their content and circumstances of creation? If documentation is lacking or inadequate, does the institution have the resources to play and document all of the recordings, and is it willing to do this?

K. Use potential: Who might be expected to use these recordings, and for what purpose? Are researchers in this subject field amenable to using sound recordings, or will they want the contents to be transcribed?

L. Use limitations: Are there restrictions, copyright conflicts, privacy issues, or other complications that might prevent the recordings from being used? Are oral histories or interviews accompanied by releases? How long will it take to resolve those issues, or for restrictions to expire?

M. Costs of retention: Given the categories, forms, and types of recordings in this collection, what will be required to process, store, preserve and make them accessible? Is the institution prepared to handle these costs? Access will involve procuring appropriate equipment, making a use copy of each recording, making a place for the equipment in the search room and processing area, and providing training and procedures for staff and researchers to use the equipment. Processing will require an investment of staff time in producing finding aids, indexes, databases, etc., that provide much more detailed information about the recordings (usually at the item or even the "cut" level) than many repositories customarily invest in their manuscript holdings. Preservation, as noted above, involves a commitment to maintain the recorded information in recorded form. Given the impending obsolescence of analog recording technology, the rapid evolution of digital technology, and the lack of either recording media or systems of long life expectancy, archivists will need to reformat recordings frequently to ensure their survival, and this is a very expensive proposition. Transcribing is also expensive, although the transfer of non-medium-specific information to text can permit retention of the information without continually reformatting the recordings.
N. Relevance to institutional mission or collecting policy: One more time, after investigating the rest of the questions above, the appraiser should think about whether these materials are relevant to this institution, or, more accurately, how relevant they are. Are they relevant enough, “unique” enough, of great enough potential use to the patrons of this institution to justify the costs that will inevitably be incurred by the institution if they are retained? Are they relevant enough for other work to be put aside when these recordings need special personnel, supplies, equipment, treatment?

Summary and Afterthoughts

Should the university archivist accept the faculty member’s phonodisc collection? What is an appropriate answer to the widow of the home recordist? Will visually impaired students appreciate use of the off-air recordings of movies? And will the archivist of the 1,000 reels of unidentified broadcasts find a way to reformat the whole collection?

The answers to each question depend upon what the archivists conclude after considering the categories, forms, and types of recordings, evaluating the collections in light of the criteria outlined above, and thinking hard about the commitment of resources that will be required to support their decisions. Appraisal of audio recordings is certainly more difficult for textual archivists than appraisal of paper-based materials. At the same time, however, the fundamental concerns and questions are refreshingly and reassuringly familiar. What is the material; does it belong here; is it usable; who will use it; can we afford to keep it; can we reduce its size—these are all questions that textual archivists probably should ask themselves every day as they manage their paper-based collections. Audio recordings should be neither more nor less awe inspiring than other materials, and should be subject to similarly critical appraisal when they are offered.

Can archivists always be sure that their appraisal decisions are “right?” Probably not. But they can be sure that by thoughtfully considering the issues outlined above they can avoid accepting collections that are truly inappropriate; understand what the recordings they do accept will require in terms of care and preservation; and be prepared to set priorities before their recorded holdings become casualties of time.

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NOTES

1. This is a composite question, representing similar calls received frequently in the Special Collections Department of Georgia State University’s Pullen Library.
2. This quote is nearly verbatim, taken from an exchange with a prospective donor.
3. This is a composite question drawn from calls that the GSU archivists receive fairly regularly.
4. The GSU Special Collections Department receives calls similar to this two or three times per year. The calls are usually preservation related and, for some unexplained reason, most of the collections are described as containing “about 1,000 recordings.”
10. Archivists desiring a convenient review and updating of archival appraisal theories and literature may wish to consult F. Gerald Ham, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993).
13. Harrison, RAMP study, 44 (section 6.10.4.1).
18. Harrison, RAMP study, 41 (section number 6.9).
20. Waffen, 51.