UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

January 31, 2006
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From Cylinder to MP3 Player

The Library at UC Santa Barbara has opened up the world of historic sound recordings by mounting thousands of digitized cylinder recordings on an immensely popular new Web site, making this little-known era of recorded sound broadly accessible to scholars and the public for the first time.

Cylinder recordings, the first commercially produced sound recordings, are a snapshot of musical popular culture from the mid 1890s to the mid 1920s.

They have long held the fascination of collectors and have presented challenges for playback and preservation by archives and collectors alike.

Made of wax or plastic, the cylinders hold music or sound just like a conventional disc record.

The cylinder technology lost out to gramophone discs in the earliest of the media format wars.

The height of the cylinder record's popularity was over 90 years ago, and unlike 78-rpm or LP recordings, which have been reissued on CD and LP in greater numbers, cylinder recordings have not been widely reissued in modern formats.

With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency, the Library has created a new and growing digital collection of more than 6,000 cylinder recordings that are part of a vast collection of early sound recordings in its Department of Special Collections.

The new online collection allows users to download digitized versions of thousands of cylinder recordings to their computers and MP3 players or to listen to the recordings online.

Visit: http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu

The searchable Web site, which was launched in November, includes nearly all types of recordings made around the turn of the 20th century, including popular song, vaudeville, minstrelsy, comedic monologues, classical and operatic music, solo instrumental recordings, band music, foreign and ethnic recordings, and speeches.

"The site opens doors to music that has previously been largely inaccessible to scholars and the public, and greatly simplifies the process of doing research with early sound recordings," said David Seubert, director of the project.

"Many of the American recordings before jazz have been neglected by scholars and are virtually unknown to the general public.

The site provides the opportunity to listen and download at no cost the music, speeches, and comedy recordings that entertained people a hundred years ago and provides a glimpse into the popular culture of the period."

Initially, Seubert had thought the site would be used primarily for scholarly research with a steady but slow stream of users.

But news of free music downloads travels quickly on the Internet.

During the site's first two weeks online, more than 200,000 audio files had been downloaded by visitors from 136 countries.

"There is a lot of really good music waiting to be rediscovered," Seubert added.

In his blog, music critic Jody Rosen (The Nation and Slate Magazine) described the UCSB site as "astonishing: an expertly designed, easily searchable trove of beautiful, weird, wonderful records, many of them extremely rare . . .UCSB is to be commended for doing a great service for popular music scholarship."

The site has a growing collection of "streaming radio" programs on various topics to guide users through the repertoire of early cylinder recordings.

Each program presents a pre-selected grouping of recordings unified around a theme.

They include Cakewalks and Rags, German Comic Cylinders, American Vaudeville, Early Black Artists and Composers, Operatic Cylinders, Pioneers of Audio Theater, and Historical Speeches on Edison Cylinders.

New programs will be added each month in the coming year, focusing on music from World War II, jazz recordings, Jewish dialect recordings, band music and marches, women pop singers, Czech music, and more, said Noah Pollaczek, who digitized the recordings for the project.

The cylinders were cataloged and transferred by Pollaczek to a digital format using an Archeophone, a modern cylinder player that allows for transfers of much greater fidelity than antique equipment.

"It is remarkable how much musical information is contained in the grooves of these recordings when played back on modern equipment," said Pollaczek.

The Library's collection of early sound recordings is one of the largest in the country with over 6,000 cylinder and 190,000 disc recordings in the collection.

The Library has been a leader in making early sound recordings accessible to the public and is also home to the Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings, a major online discographical research tool currently under development.

The site further enhances the UCSB Library's reputation as a leader in the development of digital libraries.

In addition, the Library is home to the Alexandria Digital Library and is a leader in the dissemination of geospatially referenced information.

It is a partner in the National Geospatial Digital Archive, a collaboration among the Library of Congress, UCSB, and Stanford University to develop standards for the preservation of digital data.

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Cylinder Audio Collection

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