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UCSB Library awarded $350,000 to digitize prewar American music recordings

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Considered one of the most fertile eras of American recording history, the 1920s and 1930s brought many now-legendary jazz, blues and gospel artists to the forefront, including Duke Ellington, Robert Johnson and Mitchell's Christian Singers. To support the documentation, digitization and public streaming of thousands of those recordings, the National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded $349,993 to UCSB Library.

The award will enable the library to add the discographic data for 12,000 recordings made by the American Record Corporation (ARC) to its Discography of American Historical Recordings (DAHR) project, and to digitize 8,500 recordings by ARC and its subsidiaries dating from 1922 to 1938 for free online access.

“ARC is the missing link between the original Columbia Records that pioneered sound recording in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the Columbia Records that still exists today,” said David Seubert, curator for UCSB Library’s Performing Arts Collection and project director for the new grant. “The recordings made by ARC are of intense interest to scholars and collectors, but there has not been a systematic project to document ARC until now.”

ARC and its predecessor, Plaza Music Co., owned many significant labels, including Columbia, Brunswick, OKeh and Vocalion and also had a large Spanish language division. In the 1930s, ARC was the third-largest record company in the U.S. behind Victor and Decca and made some of the most important prewar recordings, often by artists other companies overlooked.

The library’s American Discography Project and its DAHR online database document and describe for research 78-rpm disc recordings made by American record companies from the inception of disc recording in the 1890s until the transition to 33 ⅓-rpm vinyl long-playing (LP) records after World War II. The discography includes more comprehensive information on historical recordings than any other online or print resource, and DAHR is the largest online database documenting sound recordings of the standard-groove era (before 1955) and provides digital access to over 70,000 recordings.

The award marks the sixth National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) grant in support of DAHR; to date, the project has received more than $2 million from the federal agency. The latest DAHR award was among $26.2 million in NEH grants for 238 humanities projects nationwide.

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