

Echoes in a Bottle

LORNA TRACY

Chances are that whenever you hear the word “recording” you automatically think of music. To do so is certainly natural. For many years recordings of music were just about the only kind to be commercially produced, and it was not until the long-playing record was perfected in 1947 that any extensive or systematic recording of the spoken word was even undertaken. Yet the phonograph is in a real sense a type of time-machine such as men have dreamed of for centuries. “Long before Edison men of imagination had conceived of the possibility of keeping as permanent a record of uttered speech as of words committed to print. Giovanni Battista Porta (1542-1597) had the idea of conserving words in sealed leaden tubes and of releasing them as and when necessary. A century later Cyrano de Bergerac, in his *Histoire Comique*, imagined books that spoke, and at the end of the 18th century, F. Grundler of Nuremberg believed he could keep words, as preserved echoes, in a bottle.”¹

Thomas Edison, who invented the phonograph in 1877, was himself much less concerned with preserving musical performances than with capturing the voices of great men for posterity. One of his machines, carried to England, recorded the speech of such eminent persons as Gladstone and Browning. The inventor himself contributed to oral history with a recitation of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Nevertheless, almost from the beginning, the musical potential of Edison’s “talking machine” was seized upon and exploited far beyond any other.

Today, nine years short of the 100th anniversary of this invention, the sound recording is a form of material still relatively new to scholarship. Students of languages, medicine, zoology, political science, history, literature, drama, and anthropology are all potential users of recorded materials, and it is surprising to discover that academic libraries

¹ John Cohen, *Human Robots in Myth and Science* (New York, 1967), p. 85.

in general have been slow to collect recordings, particularly in non-musical areas of investigation. Among librarians in academic and research institutions there has been a tendency to regard phonograph records as mere entertainment, like paperback detective novels, and therefore more appropriately collected by public libraries. In 1963 Harold Spivacke, Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, called for "a change of attitude towards records on the part of many research libraries in the world today,"² remarking that even some music libraries continue to view recordings as "quaint" items unfit for serious scholarly consideration. Although the shelves of these libraries may be packed with scores and manuscripts and tomes on every aspect of music, there are those that have not a single recording in their collections. Librarians are famous for their devotion to silence, but *this* is ridiculous! Even more recently, Helen Roach, in the 2nd (1966) edition of her useful book *The Spoken Word*, stated flatly that "few college and university libraries have developed collections of the spoken word."³

Such indifference toward a new medium for preserving human thought, history, and personality cannot endure very long against the general electronic revolution now upon us. While books are still central to academic libraries and while the badge of the scholar is still his pair of glasses and not his hearing aid, the strict concept of libraries as repositories of printed matter has been giving way. Before long such a concept may even be entirely obsolete. If John Kemeny⁴ is right, by that magical date 2000, the academic library will be a building filled with study booths, electric typewriters, and TV screens and there will not be a book in it.

While we can't put off thinking about changes until the century has actually turned, it is our purpose here to look at the present state of things. Recordings *are* infiltrating academic library collections. However, it is often impossible to tell what kind of recordings a given institution is collecting, since no distinction is generally made between musical and nonmusical recordings in annual reports or in the professional literature. Lee Ash, in his *Subject Collections*, 2nd edition (1961), lists very few university libraries as having record collections.^{4a}

² Harold Spivacke. "A National Archive of Sound Recordings," *Library Journal*, LXXXVIII (October 15, 1963), p. 3783.

³ Helen Roach, *The Spoken Word* (New York, 1966), p. 12.

⁴ See J. G. Kemeny, "A Library for 2000 A.D.," in Martin Greenberger, ed., *Computers and the World of the Future* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 134-178.

^{4a} A comparison of the 2nd edition of Ash with the 3rd edition (1967) just

In Kruzas' *Directory of Special Libraries and Information Centers* (1963) there is only Yale to represent Academia in the area of sound recordings. If one studies a selection of library handbooks from the 1950's on down to the present, one gets the impression that few university libraries have collections of nonmusical recordings that they seem to consider even worth mentioning. Annual reports often show an expenditure (usually not a very large one) for recordings, but do not differentiate between music and spoken word. It can probably be assumed that most of the money allocated for recordings is spent on musical ones. In 1958 David Hall studied the incidence and use of recordings in twenty-six outstanding American colleges, hoping in particular to find some correlation between the use of recordings and the general academic excellence of the institutions. No such correlation appeared. Among the statistics that emerged from his study are these: in 1957 thirteen of the twenty-six colleges had collections of nonmusical recordings, ranging in size from sixteen to six hundred and forty disks. In that same year the average amount spent by the colleges for musical *and* nonmusical recordings was \$311.24. It is clear that collecting recorded material was a very minor aspect of the college library's activities in 1957.⁵

The situation in the three state universities in Iowa today may illustrate three stages in the development of academic record collections. One institution, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, has no nonmusical recordings at all. This, I understand, is primarily a question of space, and nonmusical recordings will probably be collected as soon as there is room to house them. At the University of Northern Iowa there is a small collection of nonmusical recordings, a few of which circulate. This collection was begun just three years ago and now numbers some two hundred and fifty titles. It has no specific budget. At The University of Iowa, the largest of the three Iowa institutions, we have had spoken word recordings in the library for twenty years. At present this collection contains almost 2,200 titles and includes material useful to students of zoology, anthropology, medicine, religion, classical and modern languages, history, political science, and

published shows the new edition having more than four times as many listings under Phonograph Records as the 2nd edition had, and this time music collections are generally identified as such. Public libraries are still well in the lead as far as collecting recordings of any kind goes, and music still has it all over the spoken word. But a dramatic change in the importance attached to recordings in libraries is evident.

⁵ David Hall, *The Incidence and Use of Phonograph Records in a Selected Group of College Libraries*, MSLS Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1958.

physical education. However, as the collection is undoubtedly strongest in the areas of recorded poetry and plays, it is not surprising to learn that the heaviest use of spoken word recordings is made by students of speech, literature, and dramatic art. At peak study hours it is not uncommon to have a queue of students waiting to claim a listening booth. There are only three booths at present, but at least three more will be built within the next year or two when additions are made to the library building. Each booth is now equipped with a Caliphone record player converted to accommodate stereo records, though there is no actual stereo playback equipment in the booths, nor are tape players provided.⁶

In 1951 the senior class of The University of Iowa, probably inspired by the presence of a new library building on the campus, but also surely nudged by foresight, gave the library \$2,000 to be spent for "talking records." The collection of spoken word recordings at Iowa may in a sense really be dated from this time. Near the collection is a bronze plaque commemorating the class of 1951 and its gift:

'Listen as they spoke'
An historical collection
of recordings of poetry
drama and speech.

There is not now and has never been any curator of recordings. Purchases are made mainly on the basis of reviews and faculty requests. The current budget allows \$400 for nonmusical recordings, \$500 for musical ones. Compared with what is currently available for purchase, the collection of spoken word recordings at Iowa is by no means a comprehensive one.

Nevertheless, when the record collection was recently checked against standard discographies such as Roach's it was found that most of the standard works are present. In the collection is poetry in English (or Anglo-Saxon) ranging from *Beowulf* up to the work of George Starbuck, the poet who is now Director of the Writers Workshop at The University of Iowa. Undoubtedly among the most interesting recordings of authors reading from their own works are Gertrude Stein and e e cummings, whose experiments with language and typography have made their work difficult of access on the page. Edith Sitwell's

⁶ Also on campus, though not available through the main library, are music records, language laboratory materials, and Talking Books for the Blind. The largest collection of recordings on the campus belongs to WSUI, the University radio station. Many of their thousands of records are musical, but a substantial portion are spoken word.

recording of *Façade* is an exhibition of her verbal and vocal virtuosity that is hard to match in all of recorded literature, although James Joyce's reading of a fragment from "Anna Livia Plurabelle" likewise reveals the vocal gifts of the author. As recordings both may be described as Rosetta Stones for future readers.

A great deal of poetry and drama in languages other than English is represented in the collection. We have the poems from *Doctor Zhivago* read in Russian, though not by Boris Pasternak. We have Racine, Moliere, Corneille, and Voltaire in French, Sophocles in Greek, and Goethe in German. Japanese theatre is represented by recordings of the Takarazuka Dance Theatre, the Bunraku Puppet Theatre, and several Noh plays.

In the realm of radio journalism are recordings of voices and events associated with the Kennedy assassination, a documentary on the hydrogen bomb, the death of King George VI and the coronation of Elizabeth II. "Eisenhower in Asia" is backed by "Khrushchev in America." We have recorded conversations with Rodgers and Hammerstein, H. L. Mencken, and Henry Miller. Three of the Nixon-Kennedy debates from 1960 are in the collection, as well as a speech by the late George Lincoln Rockwell and portions of Bertold Brecht's appearance before the Committee on Un-American Activities in 1949. Harry Oster, a professor in the English Department at The University of Iowa, has recorded music and folklore of various ethnic groups who have settled in Iowa. Recordings of Christmas carols and an Easter service from the Amana Colonies also add to our holdings having particular local interest.

If one should tire of purely human talk and art, he can listen to underwater sounds of biological origin. In the midst of quite a lot of sloshing, rather like the auscultation of a mighty gut, one can hear the sea robin. Other records reproduce the sounds of frogs, courting crickets, and a variety of North and South American birds including the cry of the great rufus motmot.

We are now attempting to fill the lacunae we discovered and to buy what seems to be the best of the new offerings in the record dealers' catalogs. We can already supply not merely a complete recording of *Othello*, but a choice of casts. Students of the theatre may compare Paul Robeson's authentically black Othello with Sir Laurence Olivier's recently attempted transformation from pale British peer to a Moor of Venice. Then, those who still have an appetite for tragedy can listen to Frank Silvera's version of the same role. We can similarly offer a choice of *Lears*: Hilton Edwards, William Devlin, Paul Scho-

field, even Dylan Thomas. At present the nonmusical recordings at Iowa lack almost entirely those primary source materials that make a collection such as The National Voice Library at Michigan State⁷ or the Historical Sound Recordings Program at Yale⁸ so important to researchers. It is to be hoped that eventually tapes of the campus events recorded by the University radio station can find a permanent home in the library collection, to provide an archive of sound at Iowa.

⁷ See G. Robert Vincent, "The Sound of History," *Library Journal*, XC (October 15, 1965), pp. 4282-90.

⁸ See J. N. Moore, "Purpose and Scope of the Historical Sound Recordings Program," *Yale University Library Gazette*, XXXVIII (January, 1964), pp. 92-110.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BILLIE BATCHELOR is an Instructor of English at Wisconsin State University, La Crosse. Her dissertation, in progress at The University of Iowa, is a study of Iris Murdoch's novels.

RICHARD M. KOLBET is Map Librarian. His article on narratives of North American exploration appeared in the April 1967 issue of *Books at Iowa*.

LORNA TRACY is a librarian in the Acquisitions Department and the author of *Noon and Paradise*, a play based upon the life of Emily Dickinson.

ANTHONY T. WADDEN is a doctoral candidate in English concentrating on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novel. In 1964-66, while teaching at California State Polytechnic College at San Luis Obispo, he lived in Shell Beach, California, where he was a neighbor of author J. Hyatt Downing.