

Unlocking the Vault: An experience of Oral History Digitising.

Within various library collections, we have over 2000 hours of highly significant audio recordings in the form of oral histories. The vulnerable nature of the magnetic media makes it critical to preserve the content. It is not feasible to maintain (over a period of 20-30 years or more) the existing hardware because they are not readily serviceable or manufactured any more, and are technically obsolete. At the State Library of Victoria we are embarking on a project to capture the content of these audio tapes, ensuring that the spoken words of significant Victorians and Australians are kept alive for future generations. The digital file is captured in sufficiently high resolution to capture all the available sound, and then this 'master file' may enable derivative files (e.g. MP3) to be created for delivery and access purposes.

The Oral History Collection

Table 1 shows the identified recordings by area. About half of the tapes are in Arts Library and the other are in various 'collections' in Manuscripts. The average duration is an hour, but some are 30 or 45 minutes, and a few are several hours (such as the opening ceremony of the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne.) There is a breakdown and description of each area below. The date of the recordings range from the 1950's through to the 1980's. Very few recordings of this type have been made after 1985. Please see the footnotes below for more detail for each collection.

Collection	Original Reel	Archival Master Reel (copy)	Original Cassette	Access Cassette (copy)	Catalogued
Arts	854 (1200) ¹	Some (300)	no	yes	some ²
Glenelg (GTMS)			193	no	Collection level
Lowenstein (T)	some	50	63 ³	no	Collection level
Jazz ⁴	no	100	borrowed (125)	Yes (125)	no ⁵
Manuscripts (TMS)	950	no	no	500	some
TOTAL	2185 units				

Table 1- Collection and status (indicative quantities only)

1. Arts

The Arts Library's oral-history collection is centred on a series of interviews commissioned by the State Library and conducted by James Mellen in the 1970s and 1980s; a small number of interviews were conducted by Joyce McGrath (Arts Librarian at the time, and no relation to the author) as well as other Library staff.

¹ There are approx. 854 titles, but many of these have more than one reel, bringing the total to about 1200.

² An extensive handwritten list of all recordings exists, but it is not on the library catalogue (Voyager).

³ These total 111 as a collection, and its made up of reel, cartridge and compact cassette

⁴ The Jazz collection has been recorded by an external group of musicians- and loaned to the library. The majority of these have been copied to cassette tape.

⁵ As with the "Arts" collection, lists are available in the form of card indexes and some have individual Voyager records.

The subjects of the interviews cover a broad cross section of the Australian arts community and include painters (Jeffrey Smart, Arthur Boyd, James Gleeson, etc.), sculptors (Lenton Parr, Mike Kitching, etc.), musicians (Julie Anthony, Eileen Joyce, Graeme Bell, etc.), composers (Peter Sculthorpe, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Carl Vine, etc.), actors (Beverley Dunn, Jill Perryman, Max Cullen, etc.), vaudevillians/entertainers (Will Alma, Evie Hayes, Lucky Grills, etc.), theatre directors (Robin Lovejoy, John Tasker, Richard Wherrett, etc.), writers (Louis Nowra, Peter Corris, Ray Lawler, etc.), and dancers (Garth Welch, Marilyn Jones, Freddie Carpenter, etc.), to name just a few of the areas covered.

Unfortunately documentation relating to access conditions was not completed at the time of the interviews, and a subsequent program to retrospectively follow this up has only been partially successful. Also the tapes were stored for many years in Queens Hall and were therefore subject to dramatic changes of temperature and humidity. This situation has now been rectified but the impact this may have had on the tapes has yet to be fully ascertained. A number of the tapes have had cassette copies made, but many remain available only in their original reel-to-reel format.

Whilst we no longer maintain an active oral-history program in the Arts Library we do receive copies of oral histories made by the Victorian Jazz Oral History Project, and these come complete with full access and condition documentation.

2. Glenelg

The Glenelg Regional Library oral history project (GTMS), located on D1 is a collection of compact cassettes. There are 193 in total, and are originals only. A shelf and descriptive list is available.

3. Jazz

A group of independent musicians have been doing their own field recordings on compact cassette over the years. This is currently continuing at a rate of about 10 units per year and most of these are duped onto another cassette when they arrive at SLV. It's also part of the Arts Library collection- but unlike the others it has been recorded by the "Jazz" group rather than through SLV initiatives. The recordings are very good in quality, despite the media- perhaps as a result of the audio buffs who created them.

4. Manuscripts

The Australian Manuscripts Collection seeks to gather unpublished, often unique, material that documents the lives and experiences of Victorians. It collects a range of formats, including sound archives, generated by private individuals and non government organisations. However, development of the collection of sound archives has not been pursued very actively in recent years, largely because the Library has not had adequate specialist facilities for storage and conservation until now.

Many of the recordings were created and acquired in the 1960s to 1980s. They have been acquired by donation and purchase, through the work of Library staff (e.g. Patsy Adam-Smith, Charles Fahey), or through support by the Library of outside individuals and groups (e.g. Wendy Lowenstein). Others were directly commissioned by the State Library (e.g. interviews conducted by Peter Crockett) or resulted from collaborative projects with other bodies (e.g. Valuing Our Veterans). Many were made by writers in the course of their research and some form part of larger collections of manuscript material.

The sound collection includes oral history interviews and recordings of folklore, drama and performance poetry. Some conference proceedings are also held (e.g. re Communism and

labour history). It includes interviews with some prominent individuals and many ‘ordinary’ people, reflecting trends in historical research at the time they were created. A number of the larger collections of recordings focus on particular geographical areas (e.g. Western District), occupational groups (e.g. World War I veterans, shearers, nurses, mountain cattlemen), or migrant communities (e.g. Italians, Chinese). Some (e.g. Lowenstein) have a national rather than specifically Victorian emphasis.

5. Lowenstein

Wendy Lowenstein’s collection of Australian folklore and social history on tape. Interestingly, it has some tape “cartridges” which are on the obsolete list- serviceable players are extremely rare.

Reel and compact cassette tapes are also in this collection and a descriptive list is available. They were indexed in LaTrobe Library journal, v.3, no. 9, April 1972.

Digitising Project – the work to be done.

a. Preservation

Firstly, the most time critical need for this collection, given the unstable and vulnerable media, is that of preservation. The act of preserving the recordings is done by digitising the tapes using advanced methods of capture. A local service provider has been identified, lowering the risk of sending these unique and fragile tapes interstate or overseas.

b. Access

Once the ‘Preservation Master’ file is created and stored correctly, it can then be used to create access copies, either an exact copy of the original, or a more compact version which would generally be used for delivery via the web or by other means. One hour of digital audio (48 kHz/ 24 bit) represents nearly one GB (1000MB of data), so it is difficult to open and or transmit this master on slower computers. MP3⁶ and other compressed audio formats allow for fast download or streaming of data over the internet.

c. Delivery Methods

The compressed file (e.g. MP3) can be delivered to the user via various methods such as:

1. MP3 download from Voyager Record
2. Podcast using RSS feed
3. “Web cast” using RealAudio or other formats (may offer greater security)
4. Immersive Audio (as is used on the SLV website)

d. Transcripts

There are only a few transcripts already available for this collection. It is a very expensive process to painstakingly transcribe hours of oral histories, and it may be more likely that this be done very selectively, or just for very significant titles. While the digital capture of audio is

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MP3>

done “real-time” the transcription process takes much longer, and could be more expensive than even the digitising.

e. Cataloguing and Metadata

The ‘backbone’ of the State Library’s collection is its catalogue. Many of the oral histories have catalogue records that will need updating, and the digital file format of the master audio (Broadcast Wave File: BWF) allows us to embed metadata inside the file. This option could provide a degree of automation when linking the files to our catalogue.

f. Real –Time Processes

Unlike some digital file (CD copying for example) that can be done at up to 48 times real time (48X), the process of capturing audio from analogue tape must be done in real time. This means that our 2000 hours will probably take two or three years to get digitised, depending on the volume we can process over time. It’s expected that there might be batches of 25 hours every few weeks.

g. Rights Management (Permissions)

Almost all of the recordings were made prior to the internet (pre 1980), so permissions for access were only acquired for use and playback in the Library. The library has a significant body of work ahead of us to update these permissions, especially because many of the interviewees are now deceased- making the surviving estates of the subject or next of kin the only available contact in many cases.

h. Technology Obsolescence

Tape players (reel to reel/open reel) are now no longer manufactured. They have been another casualty of the digital age. Even “modern” cassette audio from the 1970s is more and more difficult to acquire. While the State Library has three serviceable open reel players, the spare parts to keep them running are hard to find, and due to their scarcity, trained service technicians are also hard to find. This emphasises the urgency of this project: In thirty years time, not only the tapes may have deteriorated, but the machines to play them on might not work.

i. Digital Preservation and Storage

Once captured, the BWF files will be stored on our secure server, and then will be ingested into our Digital Object Management System (DOMS). The DOMS is another project that is being undertaken by the library, and will be in its implementation phase in 2007-2008. The process of maintaining the integrity of the data so it can be read and played at any time in the future will be the responsibility of the DOMS. 2000 hours of digital audio is nearly 2TB (2000GB), so digital storage is essential to house these files. It has been decided that the master files will not be stored on CD or DVD media due to their inherent vulnerability. However, these discs may be used in some instances as an access copy.

We have already been pleasantly surprised at the condition of many of the tapes that were thought to be lost. It will be an exciting process to ‘unlock the vault’ on thousands of hours of Victoria’s heritage, and eventually, where possible, make it available to all Victorians.

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