

Introduction

The Woody Guthrie Home Recordings and Audiotape Collection consists of eighty nine ¼ inch audiotapes containing home recordings, musical and theatrical performances, and radio shows. I recently “discovered” these tapes at the Woody Guthrie Archives while doing research for another project, and present below a report on the content and technical specifications of these tapes, including suggested preservation steps.

The tapes were found lying flat, which is highly improper storage for audiotape. As a result, many of the tapes exhibit tape pack problems. In addition, the tapes are housed in their original box, which aids in determining their contents, but is not the appropriate protective storage.

In addition to lacking proper storage and housing, the collection lacked any sort of



intellectual control. The tapes were stored in unmarked boxes, and although evidence of past preservation efforts led me to believe that a previous archivist was

aware of the tapes’ existence, there was no record of them in the Woody Guthrie Archives’ internal catalog or public finding aids. They were not numbered and did not appear to be arranged in any discernable order.

I conducted an item-level inventory of the collection, applying a temporary numbering system to the tapes and transcribing descriptive information from the tape boxes and reels. I then grouped the reels into series based on content type, while noting tape brand, model number and

substrate composition when possible. Finding aids for the collections, which will be made available online,¹ were produced.

Tape Content

The tapes contain a wide range of material – some commercially available and some



completely unique – and thus have widely divergent values. The most significant and unique of the audiotapes are the home recordings made by Woody Guthrie and other members of his immediate family between 1949 and 1958. These include recordings of Guthrie singing his songs (sometimes accompanying his own recordings), dance classes conducted by

Guthrie's wife Marjorie, as well as documentation of family gatherings, some with Guthrie's mother- and grandmother-in-law.² Most of these tapes are recorded on Scotch 111, an acetate-based tape which, while noted for its ability to retain information, is also inherently unstable and prone to brittleness, deformation and vinegar syndrome.

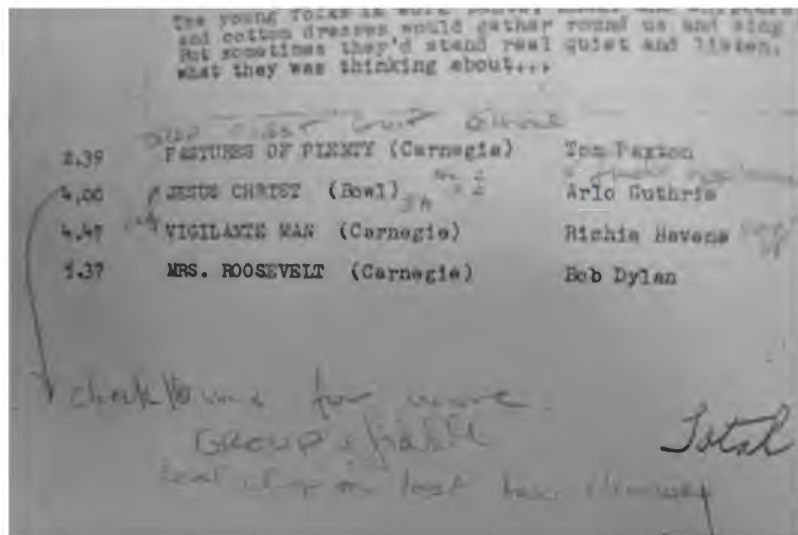
Also of significance are recordings of radio shows dating from 1940 to 1975. Most of these shows are memorial and tribute programs broadcast after or shortly before Guthrie's death in 1967 on stations across the continental United States. However, a tape of a show titled "Woody Guthrie's Children's Hour," recorded for the British Broadcasting Company in London in 1944 while Guthrie was on active duty with the Merchant Marine is also present in the collection, as is a

¹ See <http://woodyguthrie.org/archives/media.htm>

² For more detailed information on the content of these tapes, see Appendix A: Woody Guthrie Home Recordings Finding Aid

recording of Guthrie performing “High Floods Low Waters” on Oscar Brand’s WNYC radio show in 1940. The base materials for these tapes vary, and many of the tapes recorded in the 1960s and 1970s appear to have polyester substrates.

A number of tapes contain theatrical and musical performances, at venues ranging from college campuses such as the University of Southern California to Vincennes University to Dudley Rigg’s Experimental Theater Company in Minneapolis, MN. Of particular significance are reels containing stereo masters and outtakes for the albums “A Tribute to Woody Guthrie, Part 1” and “A Tribute to Woody Guthrie, Part 2.” These albums were created with recordings culled from live



performances of Guthrie’s songs at Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl (Los Angeles) by artists such as Arlo Guthrie, Judy Collins, Richie Havens and Joan Baez. The 1968 Carnegie Hall concert was especially significant because it was the first time that

Bob Dylan – backed by The Band – performed in public after his 1966 motorcycle accident. These recordings are largely on polyester-based tapes.

Finally, tapes of a number of musical recordings exist, mostly copies of commercial recordings containing Guthrie’s songs. The content of many of these tapes is unclear, as there are a number of reels titled “Folk Music Collection” which may or may not be dubs of one other. These are probably the least valuable group of tapes, and represent a lower preservation priority, especially since their substrate material is largely polyester-based.

For the purposes of description, and absent any information as to the provenance of these tapes, two artificial collections were created; The Woody Guthrie Home Recordings and the Woody Guthrie Audiotape Collection, with the bulk of the materials in the latter.

A small number of audiovisual items – microfilm reels, filmstrips, 16 millimeter film and Super 8 film – were also found in the boxes containing the audiotape. These will be added to the more general media collection at the Woody Guthrie Archives, as they did not appear to derive from a common provenance, nor seem to be in any other way related to the audiotapes.



Preservation Issues

The tapes vary in composition and reel size. Many of the tapes have an acetate substrate, which is inherently unstable, and tends to deform over time.³ Acetate tapes are also more susceptible



to improper environmental conditions (which I suspected these tapes had been subjected to) and emit a distinctive vinegar odor when they deteriorate, a phenomenon known as “vinegar syndrome.”⁴

Although polyester tapes are infamous for the “sticky shed” binder degradation syndrome, these tapes were all recorded prior to the era commonly associated with the binder formulas which cause these problems (1975-1990s).⁵

³ Bogart.

⁴ Henriksson.

⁵ Schüller.



Although I was able to identify many of the tape compositions based on information on the boxes and reels, several of the tapes were in unmarked boxes and/or reels. In addition, at least one of the reels is Scotch LR1278, an experimental tape composition about which little information exists.

The most common problems I encountered were related to tape pack, many of which likely resulted from the reels being stored flat rather than upright. In addition, some of the reels lacked flanges, although those reels largely presented little tape pack damage. Over half of the tapes exhibited tape pack problems in varying degrees of severity.

Second most common were a variety of substrate deformations, including cupping and spoking. These problems were present in almost all of the tapes with an acetate base layer, although none of them appeared to be severe cases. None of the tapes exhibited signs of “vinegar syndrome.” Some of the more recent polyester tapes also exhibited some deformation, although that damage appeared to be mechanical



(resulting from poor handling and storage) rather than chemical.

As mentioned above, the tapes are not housed in appropriate archival containers. Many of the problems associated with poor tape packs and perhaps even some substrate deformations can be

attributed to this improper housing, as well as the fact that tapes were stored flat, rather than on edge, as audiotapes should be stored.

Preservation Prioritization

Conditions survey tools⁶ generally promote the following factors as important in determining preservation priorities:

- Exposure (Use and Housing): the exposure of the materials to use or environmental conditions which are likely to result in damage. In the case of this collection, this factor remains fairly constant across the items.
- Condition: the current condition of the items, including the inherent stability (or instability) of the item, as well as deterioration and specific damage. This is probably one of the more important distinguishing factors, as some tapes, particularly those with acetate substrates, are inherently instable and also tend to present greater evidence of damage from substrate deformation.
- Obsolescence: the likelihood that a machine capable of playback exists or is likely to exist in the near future. Since this collection is comprised of 1/4 inch audiotapes, this value remains constant across all items in this collection.
- Content value: the intellectual, historical, artifactual, symbolic, financial, political or other locally-defined value of an item. In terms of this collection, this factor may represent the

⁶ These include, but are not limited to California State Library's CALIPR and Columbia University's AVDb.

largest range of values. Certain items are unique and possess immeasurable value, while others are most likely poor-quality copies of widely available material.

Preservation Plan

A preservation plan for these collections should include the following:

- Transfer tapes to digital format. The Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC) has specified Broadcast WAV files at 96kHz and 24bit as the preservation standard. Some of the tapes have already been transferred, and it may not be appropriate to transfer all of the remaining tapes. Priorities should be established based on the guidelines above, and should include unique materials and acetate tapes. Appropriate vendors for this transfer may be selected using ARSC's Audio Preservation & Restoration Directory.⁷
- Rewind reels, preferably using library wind, in order to resolve tape pack issues. If applicable, smaller reels (3 inch and 5 inch) should be rewound on larger reels.
- Improve housing and storage for tapes. Tapes should be stored upright in archival containers. However, the original boxes have artifactual value and should not be discarded, especially since Guthrie wrote on some of them.

⁷ Association for Sound Recording Collections.

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