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Article abstract

Ce texte traite à la fois de ce qui s'est fait jusqu'à maintenant et de ce qui serait souhaitable de faire dorénavant dans le domaine de la discographie. L'accent est mis sur les procédés d'analyses au moyen desquels un enregistrement peut être documenté. Les principaux problèmes et les questions fondamentales concernant ces questions sont abordés.

*The Folklorist and the Phonograph Record: An Introduction to Analytic Discography**

NEIL V. ROSENBERG

Every year I am asked by my colleague Professor Gerald Pocius to speak to first-year graduate students about discography. My guest appearance in his seminar usually follows close on the heels of a rigorous apprenticeship in bibliography, which, although it leaves the students reeling in commas, parentheses, and other paraphernalia of print, also leaves them with the feeling that there is right and wrong in bibliographic procedure. That is a hard act to follow, for discography is an inexact science at best. it is well to remember that Gutenberg had a four-century lead on Edison.

Discography is as complex a technique as bibliography and for that reason it is not practical for me to explain here all the fine points. Nor is that necessary, for many of these points have been discussed in print by well qualified scholars.[1] But I believe all folklorists should know the basic aspects of discography because through it can be learned how and why an important and influential medium—the phonograph recording—creates, conveys, and shapes folk expression. Moreover, folklorists and other scholars have for over a quarter of a century been publishing their informants' performances on record. In recent years some of the most significant folksong research has appeared in the liner notes and brochures to such recordings; too often it is overlooked.[2]

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*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Ottawa, June 1982.

[1]Ed Kahn, "Will Roy Hearne: Peripheral Folk Song Scholar," *Western Folklore*, 23(1964), 173-180; Norman Cohen, "Computerized Hillbilly Discography: The Gennett Project," *Western Folklore*, 30(1971), 182-193; Scott Hambly, "Mac Wiseman: A Discographical Enigma," *JEMF Quarterly*, 7(1971), 53-58.

[2]Kenneth S. Goldstein, "The Ballad Scholar and the Long-Playing Phonograph Record," in Bruce Jackson, ed. *Folklore and Society*. Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1966, pp. 35-44; D.K. Wilgus, "Record Reviewing in Folklore Journals—1947-1975," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 72-75. Barbara Cass-Beggs and Edith Fowke's "A Reference List on Canadian Folk Music," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 1(1973), 45-56, includes discographical entries; see also Michael Taft, "LP Recordings of Traditional Newfoundland Music," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 2(1974), 45-51.

Like "bibliography," the word "discography" has two meanings. It can describe a mere list, or it can refer to an analytic process. What I propose here is to outline the process which constitutes the study of commercial sound recordings: their contents, their uses, their place in the ethnographic scheme of things. At the same time I will suggest the kinds of phonograph recordings folklorists should be aware of in Canada.

It is just over a century since the phonograph was invented. We have come a long way in that time—from brittle cylinders to today's vinyl discs and tapes. The word discography, coined by French jazz enthusiasts in the thirties, is misleading; what we are really talking about is "sonography," the study of sound recordings, although not all sound recordings, just those which are in some sense "published"—duplicated for distribution and, in most cases, sale. In other words, I am speaking here about the aural equivalents of books, journals, magazines, pamphlets, and posters.

When we begin to compile a bibliography, we first turn to a publication's title page or its equivalents in order to discover the definitive description of each item in the list. Records have no title page, just labels, jackets, brochures, and so forth.[3] Hence, pioneer discographers began using the most universal aspect of the medium, the record number, as the primary identifying descriptor. This is particularly necessary with 78 and 45 rpm discs, which do not usually have a single title. Albums do, of course, have titles, but often it is difficult to discover the correct title, which may be given differently on the label, the front and back of the jacket, the spine, and the brochure. Titles are placed on album covers so as to sell records; record numbers are treated with great care since they are related directly to inventory and other basic sales matters and therefore of great importance to producers, distributors, and retailers.

The number that a record company assigns to its product is called the *release number*, and is, as I have just indicated, an essential aspect of any discographical citation. There is another number which has been used in the past and is still used by some record companies, the *master* or *matrix* number. This is a vestige of early sound recording technology when the original or first recording was made on a soft wax disc called a "master." From this master a metal die casting called a "matrix" was made. This was used to produce the records. At the time of the recording, the company would assign to the master recording a unique serial number. This number was generally etched into the soft wax inside the grooves near the center of the record and thus was repeated in the

[3]See Kenneth S. Goldstein, "Folklore Recordings as Bibliographical Entries," *Midwest Folklore*, 9(1959), 110-113.

matrix. Today one encounters both terms — "master number" and "matrix number" — to describe what is essentially the same thing: a serial number assigned by the record company to the unique recording of a performance made at a specific time by a specific individual. Even though virtually all original recording is now done on tape rather than wax, master numbers (I prefer this term and will use it henceforth) are still used by large companies in order to keep track of their inventories of unissued and issued recordings. Using master numbers it is sometimes possible to determine exact recording dates and related information.

All analytic discography begins with the gathering of master and release numbers, along with the titles of the records they identify. Names of performers, dates and locations of recording, and other significant data are then gathered and from this emerges an encapsulated historical outline of the situation in which the recording was made. If the recording has some significance as a document for the study of folk culture, then the discography serves to place it in context.

Until the end of World War Two most phonograph record production was in the hands of a few large, vertically integrated, international companies which recorded, manufactured, distributed, and advertised their own records. Most of these large companies included among their products recordings containing performances of significance to folklorists.

For folklorists a high proportion of the most useful discographical scholarship deals with such records. When the introduction of the radio in the early twenties led to the decline of sales in urban middle class areas, record companies began to develop urban lower class and rural markets, recording ethnic, local, and regional musics. In effect they did fieldwork, not only recording folk performances but also discovering and exploiting existing networks of musicians and musician-audience relationships.[4] A considerable body of scholarship deals with questions raised by this phenomenon: when are such recordings the same as, and when different from, performances familiar to us through our field research?[5] No matter how one resolves such questions, the fact remains that in doing discographical research, one becomes familiar with not just the practices of the record companies but also with the lives of the

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[4]For a brief history of the development of interest in this phenomenon by folklorists, see D.K. Wilgus, "Introduction," *Western Folklore*, 30(1971), 171-76. Generic case histories include Charles Wolfe, "Columbia Records and Old-Time Music," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 118-25, 144; Robert Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording The Blues*. New York: Stein & Day, 1970, and the various articles in the "Hillbilly Issue" of the *Journal of American Folklore* (78:309, July-September 1965).

[5]Anne and Norm Cohen, "Folk and Hillbilly Music: Further Thoughts on Their Relation," *JEMF Quarterly*, 13(1977), 50-57.

musicians and their communities. In-depth discography leads to ethnography.[6]

For example, the work of Dixon and Godrich lists all the recordings marketed beween 1902 and 1942 under the rubric of "race"—recordings by blacks sold to blacks: blues and gospel music.[7] Their massive list, arranged biographically and including song titles, recording dates, master numbers, release numbers, and session locations, has over the course of two decades totally refashioned scholarly thinking concerning the history and meaning of black folk blues. No significant studies written since 1960 ignore this discography; some of the most important such as those of David Evans, Jeff Titon, and Michael Taft have as their central fact discographically oriented data.[8] With the help of a good discography, one gains access to an archive of significant field recordings, made by people not afflicted with the various theoretical hang-ups that move or constrict folklorists in the field (though they are afflicted by capitalistic hang-ups, as it were).

Similar work has been under way on other parallel record series. The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, established in 1962 and housed at the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA, publishes the *JEMF Quarterly* and monograph series, devoted to the study of American folk music on phonograph records.[9] Through this and related efforts there are now discographically based research projects under way in various ethnic and traditional musics.[10]

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[6]A good example of this is the work of Archie Green: *Only A Miner*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972, and "A Discography/Biography Journey: The Martin-Roberts-Martin 'Aggregation,' "*Western Folklore*, 30(1971), 194-201. See also Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail*. Urbana: University of illinois Press, 1981, and Dan William Dickey, *The Kennedy Corridos: A Study of the Ballads of a Mexican American Hero*. Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies (Monograph No. 4), 1978.

[7]John Godrich and Robert M.W. Dixon, *Blues and Gospel Records 1902-1942*. London: Storyville, 1969.

[8]Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977; David Evans, *Tommy Johnson*. London: Studio Vista, 1971; Michael E. Taft, "The Lyrics of Race Record Blues, 1920-1942: A Semantic Approach to the Structural Analysis of a Formulaic System," unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977.

[9]Eugene W. Earle, "The John Edwards Memorial Foundation," *Western Folklore*, 30(1971), 177-81. Representative JEMF discographic publications include Norm Cohen, Eugene Earle and Graham Wickham, *The Early Recording Career of Ernest V. "Pop" Stoneman: A Bio-Discography*. Los Angeles: JEMF (Special Series No. 1), 1968, and Pekka Gronow, *The Columbia 33000-F Irish Series*Los Angeles: JEMF (Special Series No. 10), 1979.

[10]For example: Pekka Grownow, *American Scandinavian "E" and "F" Series*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of Recorded Sound, 1973 .... *Studies in Scandinavian-American Discography I*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of Recorded Sound, 1977. The 15-volume record set *Folk Music in America*, LBC 1-15, issued by the Library of Congress as part of the American Revolution Bicentennial reflects such research. Its editor, Richard K. Spottswood, is now compiling a discography of ethnic music in America. Recently published are papers from a meeting held at the Library of Congress on this topic: *Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage*, ed. Judith McCulloh. Washington: American Folklife Center, 1982. Included in the essay "Recorded Ethnic Music: A Guide to Resources" by Norm Cohen and Paul F. Wells (pp. 175-250) are references to a number of Canadian recordings.

Here in Canada we have the pioneering work of Edward K. Moogk, *Roll Back The Years*, a compilation of all the recordings made in Canada and by Canadians up to 1930.[11] It includes a considerable body of data useful to folkorists, particularly from Quebec, which was the centre of early recording in Canada. Also from Quebec comes Gabriel Labbe's listing of folkloric performances by Québécois during the early years of the phonographic industry.[12] Michael Taft's discography of recordings from Newfoundland and Labrador made up to 1972 includes a significant proportion of materials of interest to folklorists.[13] And from Florida we have Don Cleary's recently published *Wilf Carter Discography*, which provides information on a singer-songwriter whose impact on Canadian song traditions has been substantial.[14]

Here, with the exception of some fairly obscure items, most of the published documentation for Canadian discography ceases.[15] It is unfortunate that most of this material covers the years prior to the Second World War, since it was during the postwar period that our recording industry came into its own. During the fifties and sixties a variety of regional record companies were formed, labels like Arc, Banff, Rodeo, Aragon, and Celtic, which recorded local country and old-time music. Also during the fifties and sixties American companies like Folkways, Elektra, and Folk Legacy recorded Canadian folksingers. This still-obscure era deserves further research. Here, as in so many other areas of Canadian culture, the record industry cannot be understood without a knowledge of the American scene with which it is entwined. Judging from the situations which produced the blues, country, and ethnic discographies, I believe the impetus for this research will come from record collectors who, by placing values on the old records, will create a demand for discographical information as a way of defining and authenticating the body of recordings in which they invest. Record collectors have the same relation to discographers as antique collectors do to material history scholars: symbiotic and vituperative.

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[11]Edward B. Moogk, *Roll Back The Years*. Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1975.

[12]Gabriel Labbe, *Les Pionniers du disque folklorique quebecois 1920-1950*. Montréal: L'Aurore, 1977.

[13]Michael Taft, *A Regional Discography of Newfoundland and Labrador 1904-1972*. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland (Folklore and Language Publications, Bibliographic and Special Series No. 1), 1975.

[14]Don Cleary, *Wilf Carter Discography* (Ft. Lauderdale: The Author, c. 1980), available from Cleary's Palomino Records, P.O. Box 16265, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33318.

[15]William Legere, "Rodeo 100 Series (Canadian Label)," *Disc Collector*, 14(August, 1960), 14-15; 16(February, 1961), 16; 17(May, 1961), 11-12.

The analytic processes I have just described may be thought of as "classic discography," still an important dimension of this kind of research. But to it must be added new approaches reflecting the modern (and much altered) commercial recording mileau. During the sixties a new process became important and remains so: the custom record business. Today the technology and economics of record-making have become fragmented and, therefore, accessible. It is possible for individuals to make acceptable master recordings in their home and have them manufactured by a custom pressing plant which will also supply jackets and even arrange for liner notes and cover art. Individuals can have their records distributed through a variety of mail order schemes ranging from television ads to specialty newsletters. In other words, the means of production are accessible to the individual entrepreneur, who is free to handle distribution as he sees fit. For example, one Nova Scotia fiddler, winner of provincial fiddling championships and veteran of radio and television, drives a delivery truck for a dairy. Every supermarket he stocks has a rack of his records. In a region where there are a lot of fiddlers, such an individual is bound not only to sell records but also to leave his stamp on the musical traditions of the area.

Enterprising performers like him are active all across Canada, particularly in those aspects of the entertainment business that are not profitable for record companies. Fiddlers, fundamentalist religious singers, after-dinner raconteurs, ethnic ensembles, small-time folk revivalists, and many others find it useful and profitable to produce their own records. These are the broadsides of today, not much different from those that enterprising songmakers like Joe Scott had printed at the local newspaper down in Maine around the turn of the century.[16] Frequently such records are sold by the performers only and do not appear in record stores.

Sometimes record companies emerge as a result of the very specific interests of an individual who begins as an entrepreneur of this kind. In St. John's, Newfoundland, Kelly Russell's Pigeon Inlet Productions began when he issued an album containing the radio broadcasts of his father, writer-raconteur Ted Russell. The success of this disc prompted him to issue a series of recordings by Newfoundland folk performers. His growing venture has now attracted the interest of others in the province, making the company a focal point for projects relating to the

[16]Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott, The Woodsman-Songmaker*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, pp. 54-57.

folk arts.[17] The growth of specialty record companies often follows such a pattern and today there are many such companies producing materials of interest to folklorists: folk, ethnic, and religious musics in particular are often sold by such companies.[18]

It is important to recognize the existence of these small producers, for they indicate the fact that it is possible to market the kinds of performance which we go into the field to study and collect. Such recordings are not designed for educational purposes, but they can tell us much about the tastes and traditions of the performers and their community.[19] They are purchased by friends and neighbours of the performer; by others in the extended community who value them because they document aspects of identity—religious, social or ethnic; and by curious outsiders—tourists, folk enthusiasts, and record collectors. We can treat such recordings as documents of specific performance styles and texts; as means of transmission; and as the source for other performances in the community. As I mentioned earlier, discographers have documented these aspects of records from the early days of the recording industry. But it is important to realize that similar recordings now emerge not from large national companies but from the community itself.

Such recordings sometimes play a role in the phenomenon whereby a performer is "discovered." The discoverer, always an outsider, may be a folklorist who sees heuristic value in the performances or a folk music enthusiast who finds aesthetic value in the performances. Though folklorists sometimes tend to distance themselves from the enthusiasts who attend folk festivals, listen to folk music broadcasts on radio, and buy folk music records, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two groups when it comes to phonograph records. Folklorists among themselves do not constitute a large enough market for records; hence, if a folklorist wishes to place his discovery on a record, he must find a company or individual who perceives a market for the music, and sometimes enthusiasts constitute this market.[20]

[17]Interview with Russell by the author, April 16, 1982, St. John's, Newfoundland. On deposit at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, accession number 82-095. Most of this interview appears in Neil V. Rosenberg, "Pigeon Inlet Productions: An Interview with Kelly Russell," *The Livyere*, 2:1 (August-October, 1982), 30-33, 56.

[18]Robert Carlin, "The Small Specialty Record Company in the United States," *JEMF Quarterly*, 12(1976), 63-73; Harry Oster, "The Evolution of Folk-Lyric Records," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 148-50.

[19]Kathleen Monahan, "The Role of Ethnic Record Companies in Cultural Maintenance: A Look at Greyko," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 145-147, 156.

[20]David Evans, "Field Recording with the Phonograph Record in Mind," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 89-93; Keith Cunningham, "What Should a Documentary Record Be?" *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 78-79; Chris Strachwitz, "What's Involved in Making Documentary Records of Folk Music," *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 86-88; Bruce Bastin, "Flyright Records: Aims and Objectives of a Small Documentary Concern" *JEMF Quarterly*, 14(1978), 75-77.

Many of the larger American companies that specialize in folk music follow the example set by Folkways and depend upon a mixture of education and entertainment to sell records.[21] Knowing that their records will not sell quickly to a large number of people, such companies concentrate on products which are kept in print over a long period of time and marketed through specialty outlets—shops, mail order retailers, and so forth. Some companies have, in addition, sought to re-channel their recordings into the community from which they came. Rounder Records of Boston has among their publications a series of Cape Breton fiddle records which not only are marketed in the greater Boston area where many former Maritimers live but also can be found in shops and supermarkets in Halifax and on Cape Breton. But this is the exception rather than the rule—generally field-recorded phonograph records appear to have little impact upon the group from which they are taken, because the group is not aware of them.

Records are, then, produced through a myriad of processes today which can spell confusion and difficulty for the folklorist who wishes to document them. For this reason it is best to analyse contemporary records by first breaking the process of record production into a series of steps so that one can ask the same questions of each record.

First: How was the original recording made? Is it a home recording, a field recording, a studio recording, or an older record re-recorded (a "reissue") for the album? Often the difference between a home recording and a field recording is merely a question of who owns the tape recorder. A studio recording may involve a range of situations. Many studios begin as converted garages or basements using home recording equipment. Radio stations sometimes rent their facilities. There are a few massive professional studios which may charge hundreds of dollars an hour to generate recordings. A related question is who pays for the master recording—performer, producer, or record company? Since most master recordings involve tape recorders with multiple tracks which must be mixed down to the two stereo tracks of the record, it is also important to know who controls the final mixing of the record, for therein rests control over the sound of the recording including decisions about emphasis upon voice or instruments and so forth.

Second: How and by whom was the final product made? Someone has to design the cover and provide the copy for the back of the album. Sometimes this is done by the performer, but he may simply give the

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[21] A thirteen page pamphlet compiled by Kathleen Condon, *Record Companies in North America Specialising in Folk Music, Folklore and Ethnomusicology*. Washington, D.C.: Archive of Folk Culture, 1982, lists 219 separate companies of which five are Canadian.

custom pressing company liner notes and the title of the album, and leave questions of design and layout to them. In such instances the company will supply stock shots for the cover, just as the old broadside makers used and reused stock woodcuts. In other cases, the record company may have its own artist, and hire someone to do liner notes. If the recording is a "field recording," typically the researcher who made the recording will do the notes, explaining the significance of the record.

Third: At whom is the record aimed? The name of the company, the liner notes, the cover picture, the title—all tell us something about the values and expectations of the company concerning potential buyers.

Any attempt to deal with phonograph records as they relate to folkloristic studies must take into account the social and commercial systems which generate these recordings. The criteria which I have set forth reflect a larger point which is crucial to a clear understanding of such media: records and their containers must be viewed as artifacts that, when studied closely, tell us about the musicians and those who would market their music, as well as about the values attached to the music. The questions I have raised are only the most basic ones, the starting points. The rest will have to wait until next semester.

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Résumé

Ce texte traite à la fois de ce qui s'est fait jusqu'à maintenant et de ce qui serait souhaitable de faire dorénavant dans le domaine de la discographie. L'accent est mis sur les procédés d'analyses au moyen desquels un enregistrement peut être documenté. Les principaux problèmes et les questions fondamentales concernant ces questions sont abordés.