

AUDIO AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: Rob Cristarella, Audio Preservation Specialist



Rob Cristarella has been with the Library of Congress since 2011. His title is Audio Preservation Specialist.

He works, not so much at a desk, but at a console, surround by audio equipment. He sits, every day, in an audio studio, one of a series of nine specially-designed rooms at the Library of Congress' Packard Campus in Culpeper, VA. These rooms were built for optimal sound quality. They float. That is, the room is a room within a room, built on a rubber frame, to prevent vibrations from the outside to color the sound inside. Internally, the walls are non-parallel and there are sound diffusion and sound absorption treatments attached to each inside wall and on the ceiling.

Ever since Rob first joined the Library, most of his work comes to him from the Library's American Folklife Center (AFC). Currently, he is working on an audio collection from the 1940s that the AFC acquired from Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. The collection consists of airchecks and other recordings from their campus station WSRN. The collection is made up of discs, cassettes, open reels and DATS (digital audio tapes). They are mainly recordings of various folk singers, many who were very talented but few who were very famous. Rob's job is to digitize all of these recordings, not only seeing to their preservation but also to make it easier for them to be shared and listened to. Most of these recordings have probably only ever been listened to once--if even that much!



American Folklife Center

After Rob gets assigned a collection from AFC—the raw materials, the original items, will be sent to him from the Folklife offices up in DC. From there, first, he'll work on cleaning the discs and other items. This might involve everything from using a microfiber cloth to employing a Keith Monks record cleaner, a device used industry-wide which uses cleaning fluid, a brush, and a vacuum system to clear discs of all embedded dirt and dust.

After the items are free of debris, Rob will—in the case of a disc—select the proper speed and appropriate sized stylus for the record and then put it on his turntable. (Though later standardized, early on there was no consensus for speed or groove size.) As he starts the record up, he'll begin to ingest the sound into a digital audio workstation. He'll maintain the audio levels but, beyond that, Library policy is not to “fix” any alleged flaws in the recording—the goal is to preserve a recording as purely as possible. Any audio cleanup of noise or similar flaws can be done later, on a copy of this preservation file using ever-evolving specialty software.

As with video or film digitization, audio digitization takes place in real time. A disc that is 30 minutes long takes 30 minutes to digitize. During the digitization process, Rob will listen for any skips or other physical flaws like hairline cracks or chips on the disc surface that interferes with the smooth processing of the sounds being captured. Those he will fix, if possible.

Along with overseeing the digitization process, Rob will also input into his system the necessary metadata for each recording. Metadata elements will include: the Library catalog number, the type of equipment used, the date, and his name as the digitizing engineer.

Over his ten-plus years with the LC, as one can imagine, Rob's gotten to have access—and, often, first crack at—some remarkable sounds. One of the most memorable was a treasure trove of lacquer discs, long believed lost, recorded by the one and only Woody Guthrie. They were made, c. 1941, during Guthrie's month-long employment with the Bonneville Power Authority (BPA) located in Portland, OR. Hired as an “information consultant,” Guthrie's job was to write songs to “sell” the idea of the works project to the public. During his short time, Guthrie was prolific and wrote several memorable works including, not surprisingly, “Grand Coulee Dam.”



Woody Guthrie

Shortly thereafter, Guthrie recorded demos of his compositions but, beyond that, they had little distribution.

Decades later, a number of these discs (which included Guthrie singing “Pastures of Plenty” and “Roll on Columbia”) were found in, yes, a thrift shop. The purchaser of the discs wasn’t really sure what they were or what to do with them. So, he posted about them on an audio-oriented online discussion board. This brought them to the attention of both Rob and AFC archivist Todd Harvey who acquired them for the American Folklife Center and then sent them to Rob for preservation.

They are 11 double sided sound discs. They feature Guthrie with guitar and sometimes harmonica. Despite over seventy years of time and unknown use and storage, according to Rob, “Most of the sound quality is PHENOMENAL!”

Listening to the lost, the forgotten, the unheard is a big, big part of Rob’s job. But the biggest part is making them no longer lost, securing them for future generations to hear, enjoy and learn from.