

Cylinder Project News

Recording Intellectual History

In the daily flurry of matching documentation to recordings, it is instructive as well as therapeutic to step back and consider what the artifacts reveal to us about the early history of American ethnomusicology.

We are able to evaluate how collectors dealt with the mechanical difficulties presented by cylinder technology, and this better informs us as to the character of field methods during the years 1893-1930. Collectors who recorded consecutive cylinders in an effort to obtain a complete text are more in line with modern standards than those who, so as not to truncate a song, simply decreased the cylinder's rotations per minute, showing little regard for the integrity of the music. The practice of shaving cylinders in order to reuse them in later field trips suggests that the preferred method of preserving traditional music in this era was still transcription into, more often than not, Western musical notation.

Since the Archives houses much of the Franz Boas material from the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), Northwest Native American music is well represented in our holdings. As we document these collections, we will be looking for configurations of method and theory among Boas' associates in an effort to better understand the rise of the anthropological perspective in ethnomusicology.

What is particularly noteworthy of the materials deposited by both AMNH and the Chicago Field Museum is the marked connection many of these collections have with the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv. For example, Erich von Hornbostel, head of the German archive, recorded Amerindian songs in the field and studied Pawnee ceremonies with George Dorsey of the Field Museum in the early 1900s. The von Hornbostel Pawnee collection and others now housed at the Archives are not original cylinders, but are rather duplicates made from a copper negative electrotype process used by the Berlin archive. Such evidence of collaboration indicates a stronger relationship be-

tween the German school of comparative musicology and the early study of American music than is commonly acknowledged by post-1950 historians of ethnomusicology.

It often seems that we are excavating intellectual history as we re-record the cylinder collection. Not only are we able to evaluate the work of significant figures in major traditions, but we are also the documentors of the excellent research completed by scholars somewhat less well known, such as Berthold Laufer, Natalie Curtis Berlin, Robert Morey and Constance Goddard DuBois. Our catalog will make primary resource materials available to students of ethnomusicology and the public at large. With it, we offer to the community the challenge of refocusing an understanding of the earliest period of sound recording.

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