

From the Attic

My Favorite Vintage Recordings

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A New Trend

Over the last dozen years I've seen a steady increase in the number of orders for restoration and duplication of very old sound recordings. I'm happy to see the trend.

In a nation devoted to taking pictures, there is a growing interest in the preservation of the *sounds* of the important people and events in our lives. Many children have never heard the *voices* of their grandparents, or of other family members no longer living. There are old original discs and tapes stored in attics, basements and garages that hold precious memories from bygone days. They aren't playable on modern equipment, so they gather dust until they're discarded. Then they're lost for all time.

Over the years, I've developed methods of transferring these priceless recordings to cassette and CD. During the transfer process, some of the background noises can be reduced and the quality of the sound improved. I've been privileged to hear some truly wonderful recorded sounds and gain insights into the lives of my clients.

WORDS

The Toastmaster

The flood had left everything in the basement of her home coated with mud – including the open reel tapes she handed me.

"These tapes are of my father, who recently passed away. Can you save them?"

It seems that her father had made a hobby of serving as Toastmaster and Emcee for special events in his community. He told original and highly amusing stories about what life had been like in the small coal towns of Northeastern Pennsylvania just after the turn

of the century. Since he would never go to a studio to record his stories, the tapes had been made of him while he was on stage.

It took two days just to devise a method of cleaning the tapes in order to make them playable. The rest of the week was spent in careful listening and cataloging material, editing and then finally making CDs. The client was delighted with the completed Recordings, and I was entertained by the stories, one of which I still remember. Ask me to tell you the one about "Flanagan the Baseball Player."

The Attorney

The 8-track cartridge was of an original interview recorded sometime during the 60s. The voice on the tape was that of a lady's grandfather, who'd been a feisty young attorney working in San Francisco at the time of the 1906 earthquake.

When the tremors began, he was in Oakland on business. All public transportation had been commandeered for emergency use only, so he made his way to the waterfront. Waiting until a boatload of emergency supplies had just left the dock, he made a flying leap to the rear deck and said to the surprised crew, "Now, either drown me or take me to San Francisco!"

His concern was centered on his wedding, planned for that weekend. The ring and all of his cash were in his office safe, right in the center of the disaster area!

Arriving at his office location, he found that the 'quake had collapsed all of the masonry from the building, leaving nothing but a skeleton of steel beams. High above his head, he could see the safe he needed to reach – welded to a beam on the 3rd floor!

Possessed of unusual determination, he somehow managed

to climb up the beams to get what he needed, and the wedding proceeded as planned!

Hearing this story, told firsthand by someone who'd been there, was exciting beyond belief!

The Homesteader

There was a time in America when tracts of land were free for the taking. The taking was the easy part; it was the *keeping* that provided the challenge.

The open reel tape was of the client's aunt, recalling what life had been like as a homesteader in the Dakotas during the late 1800's. What an incredibly tough and tenacious people they were! They faced drought in the summer, sub-zero blizzards in the winter, and every hardship you could think of in between.

Driving the Interstate in our air-conditioned cars, favorite music on the CD player, telephone nearby, cooling drink in hand, we fail to appreciate the trials and tribulations our early ancestors faced every single day.

This priceless recording was living history at its best, telling the story the way it happened, by those who made it happen – and did it the hard way.

The Sailor

It's interesting to find a way to play a 78-RPM steel disc that's only 6" across. The recording had been made by a weary sailor aboard a battleship in the war-torn Pacific during WWII. His brief and heart-felt message was simply to let his family know that he was all right. As he spoke, his words were punctuated by occasional cannon fire!

After hearing someone under such extreme stress attempting to sound calm and comforting to his loved ones, I don't believe a photo could have conveyed the same emotional impact.

The Soldiers

Throughout his tour of duty in Vietnam, Lieutenant Dick Manley carried a small, portable, open reel tape recorder with him. During occasional moments of relative calm, he'd record his activities and observations, then send the tapes home. He recently brought 30 of his tiny original recordings here to the studio for careful transfer to CD. In tape after tape, Dick maintained a running commentary on his adventures in scenic southeast Asia, accompanied by cannon, machine gun and small arms fire, booming, banging and rattling in the background! I was struck by the stark contrast between the *content* of his messages and his *delivery style*. In a calm and pleasant voice, he described the horror and insanity of war in ways the evening TV news could not. The most terrifying of all were his detailed descriptions of the design and use of booby traps by the opposing forces. Chilling!

Someone else recently turned up a set of original tapes from 'Nam, but with a more festive content. It was interesting to listen to a working GI describe the pleasures and perils of some of the more popular R and R sites available to U.S. military personnel. Best of all was a complete guided tour of Hong Kong, including many of the nooks and crannies not generally featured in travelogues. I wonder if they're still there?

The Railroader

An old open-reel recording from long ago provided me with a real challenge. Recorded many years ago and stored in a poor location, the tape was covered with mildew! Once the tape surface was made playable, several defective splices had to be carefully redone. The reward was well worth the effort. In an unusually clear recording, I learned all about what railroad travel was like – in the 1920's!

Old photographs are static. People's voices have *movement*, and are far more interesting.

The Grandmother

I once had the sad duty to work with a 78-RPM recording of a long-time client who had recently passed away. Recorded in the early 50's during a high school performance, the fragile acetate disc had been found among her personal effects. Carefully transferred to compact disc, the sound of her then-youthful voice will have so much more meaning to her grandchildren than a photograph. Although many of us know what our grandparents *looked* like – what did they *sound* like when they were our age?

The Broadcast Executive

In the late 1930s, Donald W. Thornburgh was appointed Executive Director of the Western Division of Columbia Broadcasting Corp. in Los Angeles. So outstanding was his leadership that he became a living legend. To commemorate his career, his staff wrote and recorded a collection of anecdotes and tributes to their illustrious leader. Featuring a multitude of voices, music and sound effects, and loaded with loving humor, this amazing set of recordings was produced on 78 RPM microgroove acetates in July of 1949. Interestingly, after 50 years the humor is still funny!

MUSIC

The Wedding Singer

A retired couple in Rio Rancho New Mexico sent me an original 78-RPM acetate disc of the wife's sister singing at their wedding – nearly 50 years ago!

The recording was of excellent quality, and the music was "Ave Maria," sung in a sweet, soprano so haunting that I found myself wishing I had known the singer.

The Opera Singer

Another treasure on 78 was a forty-year-old disc recording of a famous opera singer. In transferring the music to CD for the client's listening enjoyment, I found two defects on side one of the disc. In the middle of the third song, the stylus (needle)

became stuck and wouldn't play further. Further along on the disc, the stylus would skip ahead one revolution, missing several measures of music. What could be done?

First, the music was transferred at half-speed to open reel tape, with several attempts made to coax the stylus through each of the trouble spots. When the entire side had been transferred, the tape was edited and the failed attempts removed. When the recorder was reset to normal speed for duplication to CD, the complete performance was restored in its entirety. A fine tenor voice and full orchestra provided a musical reward well worth the effort!

The Quartet

Back in May of 1941, Dick Rohrer and his vocal group, "The Emory Aces," went to an Atlanta, Georgia recording studio and cut four tunes on acetate discs. 56 years later, the pleasant mix of smooth and swing music is still enjoyable. In the careful transfer from original disc to digital audiotape (DAT), some of the surface noise was removed.

Swing Your Partner!

Also transferred to compact disc was a set of four albums of square dance music – complete with caller – recorded on 78-RPM discs more than fifty years ago. Cleaned up and enhanced, the music was as lively and life-like as it must have been at a dance so many years ago.

I'm continually amazed at the wide variety of vintage recordings that keep turning up at my studio door. The overwhelming majority of them are unique performances or special moments captured either on disc or early audiotape. Intensely personal, every one has a story to tell. Each recording provides a small glimpse of someone's life – a moment of living history. Do *you* have a special old recording that you or special family members would like to hear again? Call **610-647-4341**.