

HUNTIN' FOR DISCS WITH WILD BILL:  
WILLIAM L. SCHURK--SOUND RECORDINGS ARCHIVIST

interview by  
B. Lee Cooper

Cooper: I'm gratified that you've agreed to share some of your experiences at Bowling Green's Sound Recordings Archives with me. Will you begin by outlining the history of the collection?

Schurk: I'll be happy to share my perspectives on the Archive's growth with you. In July 1967 I joined the University's library staff. After devoting a year to assembling a collection of recording industry trade journals (Billboard, Record World, and Cash Box) and discographic tools (Gramophone, The Schwann Long Playing Record Guide, and American Record Guide), as record selection guides, to developing student service procedures and staffing assignments, and to meeting with on-campus academic department heads, directors of traditional audio-visual library programs from several states, and a variety of folklorists, newsmen, and radio broadcasters, the Audio Center finally opened in 1968. The collection retained the Audio Center designation until the summer of 1978. At that time records and score collections from Bowling Green's College of Musical Arts Listening Lab were added to the Center's holdings. The new title assigned to our collection was the Music Library and Sound Recordings Archive. As you probably know, the Archive controls all record resources on the Bowling Green campus except for the language tapes being utilized in the University Hall Listening Labs by the Foreign Language Department. Among the materials included in our collection are blues, folk, swing, rock, bluegrass, gospel, jazz, and country recordings, television and motion picture soundtrack music, out-of-print classical recordings, prose, poetry, and dramatic readings, selected kiddie records, plus tapes of early radio shows and interviews with celebrities. These items of audio information are available on reel-to-reel and cassette tapes. During the past thirteen years the University's audio holdings have grown in market value to nearly \$1,000,000. During the same time period our service statistics have skyrocketed from only occasional use of an album or two to more than 8,000 record and tape users during 1980.

Cooper: Are there other academic libraries which have attempted to preserve, catalog, and circulate recorded music resources?

Schurk: There are several collegiate record collections which are extremely significant in specialized musical fields. Three of the most famous academic library illustrations are the Rutgers University Institute for Jazz Studies, Tulane's New Orleans Jazz Collection and UCLA's John Edwards Memorial Foundation collec-

tion of traditional American blues and folk music. Some non-academic libraries also assemble large ranges of recorded material. The Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of the New York Public Library might be an example of this type of collection. Of course, the Library of Congress also maintains a Music Division. On the other hand, the Country Music Foundation's collection is strictly a privately funded endeavor. There are quite a few other specialized collections, but they're too numerous to mention. Bowling Green has one of the largest audio collections retained by an academic institution primarily because it covers such a broad spectrum of recorded materials.

Cooper: In several newspapers and magazine reports that I've read about your collection-building techniques, you are quoted as saying that you take everything. One article stated that among your "hundreds of special wants" were an album by a rock-and-roll Madrigal-styled group called the Jamies, a copy of "It's Love, Love, Love" by Guy Lombardo, and recordings on Sun, Chess, or Vee-Jay labels, a Frank Crumit and Julia Sanderson 78 r.p.m. album set, and any 78 r.p.m. records featuring Ku Klux Klan songs. This eclecticism in collecting is bewildering. How have you formally defined the acquisition policy for the Audio Center?

Schurk: As I stated before, we do not collect foreign language tapes--so the "We'll take everything!" position is obviously an overstatement. Nevertheless, our acquisition policy (see Appendix A") is broad enough to encompass the goals of the Sound Recording Archive. The word "everything" really means that I do not qualitatively define recordings as "good" or "bad" according to some musical or library acquisition standard. I would rather not put myself into the judgmental position of rejecting a piece of audio material solely on the grounds that it was of inferior quality musically, either technically or artistically, only to later discover that it was indeed a key part of the American recording history. Because of limited funds, however, I am extremely selective about the individual records I buy. I try to gear my purchases to the stated classroom or research project needs of those faculty members and students who request particular items. Also, when I discover reissue packages, which are occasionally of limited pressing, I will attempt to purchase these immediately because they tend to have a very short market life span. In selecting the materials for the Sound Recordings Archive we try to anticipate the needs of our patrons.

Cooper: Once a popular recording drops from the "Top 40" charts, it is very difficult to acquire. How are you able to secure single records and albums which were popular several years, or even several decades, ago?

Schurk: I shop--or more accurately "scavenge"--anywhere that I can to secure recordings for the Audio Center. Frankly, "Top 40",

"Top 50," and "Top 100" records are the easiest ones to get--even after they have gone off the charts. My main sources for records have been garage sales, Salvation Army and Goodwill stores, Volunteers of America shops, flea markets, antique stores, junk shops, and record conventions. These unorthodox outlets are the best sources for the purchase of single discs or albums at reduced prices.

In terms of donated acquisitions, the Audio Center has also been the recipient of a number of large gifts from both private record collectors and other individuals who have accumulated recordings. One of the largest single donations was made by Bill Randle, a disc jockey from Cleveland. We got thousands of records from him--33's, 45's, 78's--many containing valuable early jazz and rhythm-and-blues performances. Another radio personality, who was known to his young listeners of the early 50's as "Kousin Kay," also made a large donation to the Center. Walter Kay had been featured on a children's radio show that programmed songs and moralistic "Kiddies' stories" based on the exploits of such commercial figures as Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, and Bugs Bunny. He had kept copies of these broadcast recordings in his own home in Brecksville. While debating what to do with this collection, he had contacted a number of other libraries, but the directors had responded that they could envision no use for them. Of course, when they were offered to us, I gladly accepted his entire collection. One of my student assistants and I rode with my father in his station wagon to Brecksville and picked up between four and five thousand juvenile recordings--mostly 78's--a lot of them very rare items. It's much easier when a significant gift collection is brought to the campus, though. Mr. Alfred K. Pearson of Gardner, Massachusetts recently donated his entire jazz record collection to us--a thousand discs. Most of these recordings have been entered in the Archive's collection. In fact, almost every record we got from Mr. Pearson was a rare 78 dating between 1925 and 1945.

Another significant gift was acquired through an arrangement which I made with Dr. David Stupple of the Sociology Department at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. I met him at the Second Annual Popular Culture Association Meeting held in Toledo in 1971. He remarked to me that he'd heard several fine comments about the Center's collection of recordings. Then he asked if we would be interested in his rhythm-and-blues record collection. I said "yes" without any hesitation, and he invited me to his home in Ypsilanti. I carefully went through all of his records, listening to ten hours of music in the process. We finally called it a night at 1:00 a.m., packed up all his records, and brought them back to Bowling Green to become part of our collection. They included nearly one thousand 45's dating from around 1954 to 1959 and including many very rare, very important

recording companies for rhythm and blues since the early fifties. I think that Dr. Stupple had been president of the "Bill Haley Fan Club" at one time, so his collection also yielded all of Bill Haley's early 45's. All of the records included in the Stupple Collection were in "mint" condition.

In addition to donated collections and my junk shop/flea market buying, I also engaged in the purchase of recordings from mail order auction lists. Monthly newspapers like Goldmine list dealers and private individuals who are interested in selling or auctioning off records--single 45's, some 78's, and a number of LP's. The problem with this approach is that the prices tend to be very high--at least they are much higher than junk shop charges of 25, 50, or even 75 cents per album. The advantage of auctions, of course, is that they tend to sell records which are in better condition than the normal junk store variety.

Cooper: Do you ever attempt to secure unauthorized or "bootleg" recordings for your collection?

Schurk: Remember that the term "bootleg" covers a variety of audio sins. These items are not simply taped copies of regularly released recordings. Mostly they are illegally released duplications of previously unreleased material, some made during concert performances and others stolen directly from recording company vaults. One general definition of a "bootleg" might be a record which is manufactured without the artist's knowledge or permission. Over the past decade we have acquired a number of "bootleg" recordings for the Audio Center.

Of course, the "bootleg" gamit is nearly as old as the recording business itself. Live opera performances of the early 1900's were recorded behind the scenes on cylinder recorders. There also were the six-inch Little Wonder records. We have quite a large collection of these. The most famous one I know of is a 1914 recording entitled "Back to the Carolina You Love" by Al Jolson (Little Wonder #20) worth somewhere between 20 to 26 dollars, depending on the condition. When the Great White Wonder Album, featuring out-takes from Bob Dylan's recording sessions, hit the market in the early 1970's it became the hallmark of modern day rock-and-roll bootlegging. Of course, being the social historian that I am, I thought that this important item should be added to our audio collection. Not that I ever intend to rip-off anyone, certainly not Bob Dylan or Columbia Records, but I felt that the album was the prime example of what was being done in respect to illegal record marketing. After that first two-record "bootleg" set proved to be a financial success, hundreds of illegal recordings were released.

The quality of most concert-recorded "bootleg" discs is poor. Obviously, the need for taping secrecy, the type of low-visibility equipment employed (usually small, hand-held recorders), and

the amateur skills of the operator contribute to this low-grade production. In addition, when the "bootleg" disc is printed, the vinyl quality is sometimes so poor that after a few plays the grooves fail to track smoothly. Finally, the "bootleg" packaging process is often strictly hit-and-miss with jumbled listings of songs and artists--and no information about the date or the location of the recorded event.

There are occasional instances, however, when a "bootleg" disc--particularly one containing songs that have been lifted directly from unreleased studio-recorded master discs--is of the highest technical quality. I have even heard a few concert-recorded "bootlegs" that sounded clearer than the original record company studio-produced releases.

Cooper: How does the Archive's staff catalog a record album once it arrives at the library?

Schurk: Our records are shelved according to company label and number. This kind of information permits us to locate recordings easily. We have a number of student assistants who help us in shelving both catalogued and uncatalogued recordings. We have manufacturer's catalogs and other tools of the record trade including Record World, Cash Box, Billboard, and various collectors' journals which feature special discographies, biographical notations, and reference sources which enable us to place recordings in a chronological sequence.

Cooper: There must be a great diversity in the levels of audio research which you are called upon to assist. I suspect that the resource requests of undergraduate students are much easier to meet than those of Bowling Green professors and scholars from universities. Is that true?

Schurk: Frankly, there is no correlation between the academic standing of the person requesting Sound Recordings Archive assistance and the complexity of his or her record request. The reasons for this are numerous. Experienced researchers tend to initiate tightly structured, logically-ordered audio resource requests which can easily be located in our stacks or through standard record references. Conversely, a freshman student may make requests that are so vague that a librarian becomes frustrated while attempting to provide specific answers to questions which defy resolution. "Do you have any songs about war?" is one of the most dreaded overkill questions in the Archive. Perhaps the most difficult requests I've encountered in the past ten years have come from non-academic patrons--a person seeking a recording of the Turkish National Anthem, a woman trying to create an audio background for her daughter's tap-dance routine, and an elderly couple looking for a tune they danced to when they were young (even though they can only remember one word--"dream"--from the title).

Within the past two years, I can recall filling several unique requests from Bowling Green instructors and their students: (a) a program of ice skating music for a Physical Education teacher, (b) a variety of album covers from the 1950-1975 period for an Art professor who wanted his students to review the techniques of commercial album art, (c) sound tracks from selected radio and television news programs and documentaries for two history instructors, (d) a series of children's records for four elementary education student teachers, and (e) a taped recording of "Sparky's Magic Piano" which was originally performed on a Sonovox--an electronic music device--for a music major.

Cooper: Do you permit Bowling Green students and other researchers to borrow albums or tapes from the Archive for designated periods of time?

Schurk: Nothing circulates from our collection--but this is not unusual in research libraries which assemble original resource materials. We gladly tape specifically requested items which are to be used for either scholarly purposes or in classroom presentations. The new copyright laws have given us not only the right but also the responsibility to ask patrons to be concise in their duplication requests. Without this element of selectivity, our academic credibility would dissolve and we might become a subsidiary "bootleg" outlet.

Cooper: I have read several reports which estimate the value of the Archive collection of recordings at between \$250,000 and \$500,000. Yet I note that your annual budget allocations to purchase new materials have never exceeded \$4,000 during any single year. How have you been able to enrich your holdings so dramatically on such a meager annual allowance?

Schurk: As I mentioned earlier, I purchase most recordings for the Archives from sources which sell singles and albums at very low prices. At the rate records are going today, a 12" LP which sold for \$3.98 ten years ago would now cost \$8.98. From this perspective you can see why our collection is worth so much money. Just try to buy 70,000 LPs at an average list price of \$6.00 each. You have \$420,000 right there. And that's just list price. Considering the fact that at least half of our 70,000 albums are worth much more, and that brings the value of the Archive collection close to a million dollars. And I haven't even included the 5,000 45 rpm records, the 35,000 78 r.p.m. discs, or the 900 cylinder recordings in that estimate.

Your comment about the meager budget for building the Archive collection is doubly humorous. I not only have to pinch the University's pennies, but I also have to be willing to spend my own money when a bargain appears. I know that sounds administratively crazy, but I do save the receipts and turn them in for periodic reimbursement. Yet I consider these investments

to be worthwhile. I just enjoy getting rare records--whether I spend 10¢ for a mint copy of an RCA Victor label 45 r.p.m. by Little Richard which is worth \$50 or pay \$12 for a Whippet label album by the Robins. I must admit that my personal record collection hasn't grown that much since I took this job. But with the Archive's resources at my disposal, I can hear and enjoy music for eight-to-ten hours a day.

Cooper: Have you encountered any efforts by overly enthusiastic private collectors to secure rare recordings from your collection by either purchase or theft?

Schurk: Several years ago I was forced to change the locks to the Audio Center cataloging and record storage areas after we discovered that several recently acquired discs--including a Capitol recording of "Waitin' in Your Welfare Line," an RCA print entitled "Rinderella," and a Rojac label tune called "Christmas in Vietnam"--had been stolen. I don't want to blame a serious collector for this activity, though. Since that incident we've had no security problem. No one is allowed to enter the stack area without my permission. My staff is paranoid about strangers in the collection area.

There are many private record collectors who wish they had our materials, and many of them long to see everything we have. I usually escort them through our collection area. We don't let any collectors look through our record holdings by themselves, and I frankly don't have time to hover over a collector's shoulder for hours while he "Oohs" and "Aahs" over our holdings. Sometimes we have had people make offers to purchase our materials; of course, I refuse to trade or sell any item to them unless it turns out that we do have a duplicate of a particular recording.

Cooper: You are clearly in a unique position as the Sound Recordings Archivist in charge of the nation's largest popular music collection. I'm interested in your observations on two career-related issues. First, what kind of training--professional and general--has enabled you to head this kind of library operation? My second question isn't intended to be embarrassing, though it may sound that way. There seems to be great potential for the charge that a "cult of personality" dominates the development of this Archive. I sense that you are presently indispensable because of your total knowledge of the audio collection and your grasp of innovative resource acquisition techniques. Are you grooming a successor for your post--and working with organizations such as the American Library Association (A.L.A.) to foster in-service administrative training programs for future Audio Center directors?

Schurk: Your questions aren't embarrassing, but I doubt if you'll find my responses very enlightening. My original career goal was

to be a mechanical engineer with the General Motors Corporation. That goal simply didn't pan out. My interest and involvement with records and libraries date back to the early 1950's. I have an extremely large private collection of albums, 45's and 78's which I began to build in 1951. During my youth I worked at the Cleveland Public Library. Later I was also employed as a clerk in the C.P.L.'s Library for the Blind and then as a student assistant in the old Bowling Green State University Library building. When I finished my Bachelor's Degree in 1966, I took a part-time position in the General Reference Department at the Cleveland Public Library and began graduate study in library science at Western Reserve University.

The former Director of Bowling Green's campus library system, Dr. A. Robert Rogers, had offered me the Audio Center position when I was still an undergraduate student. This may sound strange because I was an English major at the time, with only five or six courses in library science. Of course, Dr. Rogers knew of my previous library experience and obviously recognized that the special audio collection system which was being considered would require someone with flexible training and out-of-the-ordinary administrative interests. Humorously, I play no musical instruments, can't even read music, and have only a layman's background in electronics. Still, after receiving my M.S.L.S. from Western Reserve in 1967, I was named Director of the Audio Center. To conclude the answer to your first question, though, I'd say that my qualifications for this position are based upon four elements: (a) broad experience in dealing with library patrons of all ages and interests, (b) sound academic training in both the humanities and library science area, (c) a vast avocational knowledge of contemporary music combined with a strong vocational commitment to assembling, cataloging, and assisting researchers in using recorded resources, and (d) administrative and person skills in dealing with academic colleagues and non-university clients.

If I left tomorrow, dozens of librarians--former students of mine, record dealers and collectors, and probably an English major or two--would apply for the vacant directorship. My tiny personnel budget has been one major deterrent to training a cadre of Audio Librarians. Most of my graduate assistants are paid by either the English or Popular Culture Departments; none work for library science credit.

The point that I must make about your "cult of personality" comment hinges upon a realistic evaluation of what occurred in the Sound Recordings Archive during the past decade. I've grown from a wet-behind-the-ears graduate into an experienced administrator. My philosophy of assembling the broadest possible range of audio materials has dominated all phases of where we have come from, where we are, and where we still have to go. No single person could learn what I have in less than five years. I'm still a very young man at forty, and I hope to



devote the remainder of my professional career to improving the Archive. My experience, commitment, enthusiasm, and knowledge--these are irreplaceable.

The major stumbling block for training potential audio center directors (at least among the individuals that I've encountered at Bowling Green during the past decade) is the inability of persons to conceive the remarkable breadth of the recorded music field. How many people do you know that like, understand, and appreciate jazz, country, rhythm-and-blues, gospel, rock, and other forms of music as well as motion picture soundtracks, radio shows, hymns, and songbooks? Not many, I'll wager. I don't either. Call it "eclecticism" or whatever, it's a personality trait that has aided me in collection building and in dealing with an unbelievable diversity of patrons. If I was biased and dictatorial--and narrow in my acquisition program--then I'd plead guilty to your "cult of personality" charge. But I'm not any of these things.

Cooper: You've accomplished so much during the past decade that I want to conclude our discussion with two speculative questions. How do you project the development of Bowling Green's Audio Center by the year...2000? And what impact do you envision the increased availability of popular music and other recorded resources will have on teaching and scholarly research over the next quarter of a century?

Schurk: I hope that I'm still around--and directing the Sound Recordings Archive--in eighteen years. Most of my visions about collection building, and sound delivery systems, cataloging and circulation practices for audio resources, and national recognition for Bowling Green as a scholarly resource are far from being fulfilled. Although some people may speculate that records and tapes might be obsolete by the turn of the century, I don't subscribe to the theory. Anyway, how could a social historian interpret America in the 1960's and 1970's without listening to 45's, albums, and cassette tapes?

By 2000 A.D. I pray that I'll have a sufficient staff to process all of the recordings that have been acquired since 1967. Now you've really got me dreaming. I'd like to think that several "angels" would provide restricted grants to the Sound Recordings Archive to purchase the numerous private record collections which will become available during the next two decades. Other funding, from the University budget or federal grants, should be devoted to equipment acquisition and staff improvement.

Traditionally, writers who have conducted research in non-classical music realms have dealt primarily with jazz and blues. By the year 2000 I trust that scholarly studies and discographic resources will be plentiful in all forms of contemporary music--rock'n'roll, country, gospel, rhythm and blues, and so on.

Similarly, I expect additional development in the field of scholarly journals dealing with various audio subjects, from country discographies to radio programs. I also see greater international exchanges of ideas and resources. Not many Americans realize how thoroughly the music of the black man has been researched in Great Britain already. And can you imagine what will happen when the Germans begin to systematically organize record lists? Seriously, I know that you have already worked with essays from Buch Und Bibliographie. That kind of discographic work is just the beginning. More song indexes are needed, too. I'm afraid that there are few library training programs that are currently paying much attention to specialized sound collections. Most Media Service Librarians are more skilled in video than audio today.

Cooper: Thanks for sharing your ideas with me. I'm sure that you'll greet 2000 A.D. as Director of the Sound Recordings Archive. My dream would be that your Bowling Green collection would be the center of a nationwide network of audio resources for academic research. Good luck in your library work.

SOUND RECORDINGS ARCHIVE MATERIALS SELECTION POLICY

The Sound Recordings Archive is an archival and research center and service unit to the University, the surrounding community, and serious scholars throughout the nation and world. The areas of concern in the Archive include all fields of endeavor surrounding the Audio recording medium and the material contained within.

Materials included in the collection are of both a primary and secondary source nature. They are intended for studies up to and including those for doctoral research.

Types of material included in the Sound Recording Archives are as follows:

A. Sound recordings

1. Phonograph records (all sizes, speeds, and groove cuts, and of all ages, from their inception up to the present; both disc and cylinder)
2. Tape recordings (open reels concurrent with the speed capabilities of the Center's playback equipment, and cassettes)
3. Piano rolls (Center retains a large collection, but does not have a player piano in its collection as of yet.)
4. Wire recordings (None are presently in the collection, however, this does not preclude the possibility of acquiring some in the future)

B. Sound recording and playback equipment

1. The console includes a complement of equipment to handle most of the tape and record configurations used on a daily basis.
2. A secondary collection of working historical machines for record playback are included both for historical study and for reproducing non-standard record configurations (i.e. cylinders and "hill and dale" discs manufactured by Edison and also Pathe' Bros.)

C. Printed support materials

1. Reference books (i.e. discographies, bibliographies, biographical directories, heavily illustrated monographs, books issued with accompanying recordings, and historical studies of recordings and related subjects.

2. Periodicals (i.e. trade, critical, and scholarly journals, newstand magazines, fanzines, and collector-oriented publications)
3. Sheet music and song folios
4. Dealer, manufacturer, and auction catalogs
5. Record promotional material (i.e. posters, flyers, handbills, and retail establishment paraphernalia)
6. Biographical and record promotional materials issued for media publication
7. Record company release notices

Subjects included on the recordings and in the printed materials are as follows:

- A. Popular music (personality, country, rhythm & blues and soul, rock and roll, reggae, etc.)
- B. Jazz, big band, and the blues
- C. Folk music and folk-lore
- D. Musical revues and motion-picture music
- E. Gospel and sacred
- F. Comedy, and humorous songs
- G. Poetry, prose, drama, and related readings
- H. Documentary and histories
- I. Old-time radio programs and television music
- J. Conferences, seminars, presentations, panel discussions, etc., relating to all academic areas
- K. Classical (an archive is being maintained through gifts and inexpensive purchases. A working collection for current music students can be found in the College of Musical Arts section of the Music Library).
- L. Juvenile stories and music
- M. International music
- N. Miscellaneous

The Sound Recordings Archives does not maintain a collection of language instruction recordings.

-- William L. Schurk  
Sound Recordings Archivist