

## SOUND HERITAGE IN AUSTRALIA AND BEYOND

Ray Edmondson

### ***Introduction***

While this session focuses on the situation and cultural importance of the sound heritage of Europe and Latin America, let me begin by saying two things. First, there are, of course, other presenters at this seminar in a far better position to speak on this topic as it relates to Europe, and it would be impertinent of me to enlarge on the sound heritage of Latin America – that is a subject about which I'm here to learn from others.

Nevertheless I am, in an oblique way, going to encompass both in some remarks about the sound heritage of my own country, Australia, and of the South East Asia-Pacific region to which it belongs. How is this so?

I should explain that modern Australia is a multicultural nation, to a large extent a society of immigrants and the descendents of immigrants. In its population is reflected virtually every nationality on earth. Its sound heritage, while having its own unique character, may therefore also be expected to reflect the cultural influences of Europe and Latin America – either directly or via another, much larger, multicultural country – the United States of America. This has had some interesting effects to which I shall return shortly.

Going further afield into the nations of South East Asia and the Pacific, we find some similarities to this pattern, for while all of them have distinctive national cultures, most were – until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – colonies of European powers or of the United States; some still are. There are legacies of this to which I will also return later.

What of the situation of sound archiving and the state of collections in the South East Asia-Pacific region? It is a patchy story of great losses and remarkable survivals; it engages the efforts of a great many individuals and institutions. It could be told clinically by reciting some figures, but they would be incomplete – in many countries the work is too young for these to be meaningful. I think it is more to the point to try to paint some pictures of the character and importance of the sound heritage in several countries.

### ***Defining the sound heritage – the patrimonio sonoro***

Before proceeding I should define my term! I take the sound heritage to include audio recordings of every kind. Obviously this includes the output of the commercial sound recording industry. Equally

obviously it includes radio programs of all kinds. But it also encompasses other sound documents such as oral history, the recording of natural sounds (such as animals and insects), industrial sounds (such as the railway fraternity which documents the sounds of steam locomotives), parliamentary proceedings, speeches at public events, ethnographic recordings documenting the language and music of cultures now lost or disappearing, the sound tracks of films and television productions... the list is almost endless, and it gets into peripheral areas such as mechanical music where one can begin to debate the definitions.

And that's just the content, for the heritage includes the physical carriers – in their ever-changing formats, from cylinder to CD and digital file – as well as the associated technology which also requires preservation. And beyond that there's the related documentation and artifacts – everything from advertising posters and record sleeves to the personal memorabilia of record and radio personalities. All in all, it's a big field.

### ***Structures and collections in Australia***

Australia today has a large number of institutions and associations which take responsibility for the preservation of the national sound recording heritage. In 1984, our National Film and Sound Archive was established to play a central and coordinating role in this task. At the national level it is joined by the National Library of Australia (which has the country's largest oral history collection), the Australian War Memorial (our national war museum, which has significant audiovisual holdings), the National Archives of Australia (which holds some of the audio outputs of Government bodies, including the national broadcaster.) and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Some significant collections exist in the state, provincial and university libraries and archives – especially in the field of oral history, in which there are hundreds of individual holdings and a very active professional association.

It is fortunate that sound recordings are, in their most widespread manifestations, reasonably durable articles which lend themselves to private collecting and advocacy, and to the creation of various societies and interest groups. There are, of course, hundreds of private collectors of recordings and associated technology, and a sampling of the various societies includes the Australasian Sound Recordings Association, the Phonograph Collectors Society, the Australian Jazz Archive, the Friends of the National Film and Sound Archive, and Music Roll Australia.

While one might say this is a fairly mature and active scene, representing many millions of preserved recordings, it has particular characteristics. The patrimony includes a very large proportion of international holdings, because Australia has always been a marketplace for the global record producing companies. It is multicultural: every language and culture represented in Australia will have some audio representation of the homeland. Nevertheless, when we look at the heritage of recordings

and technology created within Australia or by Australians, the gaps are very large. For example, the huge libraries of locally created syndicated radio programs were broken up – sometimes literally – with the onset of television. Local sound recording companies often struggled to make headway in a market dominated by multinational companies, and much of their output is now lost. Fortunately, researchers and discographers are now mapping much of this landscape so that we will have a clearer picture of what was made, even if we can no longer hear it.

Australia does not yet have legal deposit provisions for audiovisual materials at the national level, though this is provided for – to a degree – in legislation at the state level. Institutions must therefore acquire commercially produced material by purchase, donation or voluntary deposit.

### ***Cultural impact and expression***

Let me try to bring alive some of our heritage by describing a few of its characteristics, and its importance to our culture and sense of identity. They are in no particular order, but I would suggest they illustrate how the sound heritage is a powerful definer of national character.

Those of you who are English speakers will recognize my Australian accent – the way we speak, our emphasis, our intonation, our idiom, sets us apart from all other English speaking countries. But although we are a very large nation geographically, that accent is homogenous – unlike most countries, we do not have regional dialects or other significant variations from one locality to another. I can't explain why this is so, and I must presume that there isn't any one simple reason for it, but I suspect a significant factor is the existence, from the 1930s onwards, of national radio networks distributing syndicated programs created in Australia. From Perth to Sydney, we were all listening to the same material day in, day out, and unconsciously imbibing the same speech mannerisms. Australian radio programming was very largely generated within the country – very little was imported (in contrast, of course, to films and commercial sound recordings, where the opposite was true.)

And yet, there is a curious paradox here, for the *broad* Australian accent was rarely heard on Australian radio until the 1960s – *except* in the mouths of comic and character actors in radio serials who *also* included the parodied idiom of immigrants – for example from Italy or China. Australian English was considered too low class – educated, Oxford English was the acceptable norm: we were taught to be ashamed of the way we spoke! So how did the Australian accent win out? I think it was the radio serials that did it – chapter plays, nationally broadcast and immensely popular, that ran sometimes for decades and thousands of episodes, and embodied our own myths and legends. We made them in vast quantities for home consumption, syndicated them on big 16" transcription discs, and also exported them – and we still do, though now we've added pictures and call it television. Much of that legacy from the 1930s, 40s and 50s has been lost – far too much – but I know of no better way

of getting an insight into Australian life and speech of that time than to listen to a few episodes of *Dad and Dave*, *Mrs 'Obbs*, *Blue Hills* or *Yes, What?*

(sample? *Search for the Golden Boomerang*)

It's a short trip from the serials to another Australian radio institution – the race call. Horse racing is an Australian addiction – I suspect we are the only country that literally comes to a standstill to listen to a horse race, but it happens every year in November for the Melbourne Cup. Since the 1930s, race callers have developed the art of describing a race so that it comes alive in your head. They begin slowly, their voices rising in pitch and speed to the absolutely frenetic as the winning post comes in view. Race calls go out live, so there are not a lot of recordings of them, but there are enough to demonstrate a continuity of style and tradition for 70 years. They are, of course, culture specific and quite untranslatable – and no, I won't attempt to give you an imitation.

Equally ephemeral, and yet immensely important as part of our sound heritage, are radio commercials. Most are never recorded, and most of those that are get discarded. And yet they directly reflect our life and times, our small pleasures, our values and aspirations –and they can enter a nation's consciousness. I suspect I could say, without fear of contradiction, that no one here has ever heard of the *Aeroplane Jelly Song* – except for any Australians present. It's like a second national anthem. Aeroplane Jelly is a simple food product you can buy in any supermarket or grocery at home, and the song is a radio jingle recorded by a five year old girl named Joy King in 1935. That original recording is still widely used to promote the product today.... *I like Aeroplane Jelly, Aeroplane Jelly for me....* You'll be relieved to know I won't try to sing it.

Turning to a quiet different part of the patrimony, I want to emphasise one crucial use of sound recordings in cultural preservation, and that is in documenting the languages and songs of indigenous peoples. We are one of many countries in which this work has been underway for decades. The aboriginal peoples of Australia – the original owners of our country – are the oldest continual civilization on earth, and they comprise over a hundred tribal groups, each with their own language. These communities have cultures largely based on oral transmission, often without the need for written communication, but this continuity has been dramatically affected by the advent of European settlement and change over the last two centuries. So the survival of individual languages and traditions have been aided by the sound recording, analyzing and documenting language so it can be learned by new generations, and recording the speech, stories and songs transmitted by tribal elders. Not every instance is a success story: sometimes a recording is all that remains after the last speaker of their language has died.

In my final Australian example, I want to exemplify the power of persistence in keeping an aspect of the sound heritage active and alive. In the 1920s and 1930s the player piano – a self playing instrument actuated by digital information encoded on a paper roll – was a familiar part of Australian

family life. It created its own musical tradition of composition, arrangement and recording, and many well known musicians recorded their interpretations of piano compositions in this form. The medium has been in decline for 70 years but has left a large heritage of music rolls – and one place (The Mastertouch company in Sydney) where the skills of creation and manufacture are kept alive. It is now the only piano roll factory in the world outside the United States – and it is kept going not by profits (it is hardly a lucrative venture) but by a volunteer support group who have assisted its owner for nearly 20 years in refusing to allow the medium, and the heritage, to die. Among other things, they are developing a national roll archive and ensuring the 80-year-old production machinery is kept in top working order.

### ***South East Asia – Pacific***

Allow me now to turn outwards to the region of the world known as South East Asia – Pacific: that crescent of countries stretching from Vietnam in the north, Indonesia in the east, Fiji in the west and New Zealand in the south. Culturally rich and diverse, it is home to half a billion people and it has varied and diverse audiovisual heritage, much of it imperilled. Many of its leading audiovisual archives and archivists have joined together in a relatively young organization – the South East Asia-Pacific AudioVisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) – to advance their mutual objectives.

The cultures of many of these countries are very distinctive and ancient, but they have been overlaid in more modern history by the influences of colonialism. For example, Malaysia and Singapore were colonized by the British, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by the French, Indonesia by the Dutch and the Pacific Island countries largely by the French and British and some even, briefly, by Australia and New Zealand. The country in the middle – the Philippines – was colonized first by Spain and then by the United States, and Filipinos like to explain or excuse their culture (the choice depends on the circumstance) by pointing out that their country lived for 400 years in a convent, and then 50 years in Hollywood.

It's a good example of a heritage created by cross cultural influences, because in Philippine speech – it is, incidentally, per capita the third largest English speaking country on earth as well as having several indigenous languages – the lilting Spanish/American influence is obvious. Likewise, Philippine dance and music melds the Spanish, Malay and American into something unique. Listening to a large Philippine orchestra of plucked instruments playing classical western music in its own style is something I have encountered nowhere else, and it is a characteristic and defining part of their sound heritage.

Thailand has a very rich musical culture of its own, a very significant history of commercial sound recording, and quite a significant archive where these recordings are kept. Like many archival institutions in the region, it does not have a high profile outside its home base, and it can be surprising

to discover just how much is happening in a city like Bangkok to assemble the sound heritage – in universities, broadcasting organizations, libraries and archives.

This is equally true in countries that many of us might consider remote and isolated: such as Laos, a little-visited country bordering on Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, or Vanuatu and Fiji in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Yet in all three, there are very active efforts underway to make ethnographic records of venerable cultures that are now rapidly falling prey to the influences of cultural globalization.

### ***Some issues***

In these countries one sees reflected the pattern of both institutional and private involvement in audiovisual archiving that I earlier described for Australia – the pattern varies greatly, of course, from country to country, and is influenced by the size of the country and its population, as well as by its economic resources. But it is important to mention some of the issues which loom large for those who wish to preserve the *patrimonio sonoro*.

The first, and most obvious, is the question of economics. The available funds and resources are often extremely limited. It is rarely a question of meeting an ideal – archivists have to look at buying time for their collections for now, and working for improved prospects for the future. The lack of resources impacts in many ways – from inadequate collection storage and the lack of packaging for rolls of tape or film, to the fact that collections can be at risk because the radio station doesn't have any spare tape stock so things are taken from the archive and wiped for re-use.

The second, which compounds the first, are the hot and humid tropical climates which are the lot of most of these countries, and which are very destructive to audiovisual carriers of all kinds. Vinegar syndrome and mould are much more common enemies than in temperate countries to the north or south.

The third is the question of repatriation. As former colonies, most of these countries have lost some of their sound heritage to the former colonizers – and, not surprisingly, they would like to have it back, whether in the form of originals or copies. This is a view keenly felt, and it obviously raises awkward questions of costs and ownership. It is going to be one of the major archival questions of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The fourth is the impact of format change in countries which have been hard pressed to pay for the obsolescent technology which they now have, and are in no position to go out and re-equip for digitization.

The fifth is the problem – and it is a worldwide problem in our field – of skills and knowledge. The need for training and skills transfer is immense and urgent. The means at hand to satisfy the need are extremely limited. The search for answers is desperate: SEAPAVAA, like other audiovisual associations, is urgently developing resources and programs to try and meet at least part of the need.

### **Conclusion**

Surveys like this are always dissatisfying in that one can only touch briefly on individual countries, collections and issues. But perhaps they do, at least, help us to think in the broad. I hope you find some echoes for Latin America in the experience of my own part of the world. More than ever, our task of cultural preservation is a shared one, a global one – none of us has the self-sufficiency for it to be anything else – and so we, as archives, are going to need to globalize in the best sense – to share one another's burdens, to organize to speak with a united voice and transcend our fragmented past. We may have less time than we think.

And in case you think I've forgotten it, for I skipped over it rather lightly when discussing the sound heritage of Australia, let me mention the mainstay of the recording industries of most countries – music. It comes in many forms, it is both indigenous and imported, but at its best it expresses the soul and identity of a people. It is essential to preserve it so that the past can always speak to the present. Australians inherit the ancient traditions of aboriginal music, and since the invention of the sound recordings they have developed their own distinctive styles and genres. It is through this recording medium that countries with relatively small populations – like Australia – can speak to the world and be heard across the musical spectrum. A song can move the world. The field of popular music, for example, sometimes allows that possibility, and Australian bands and singing groups have gained their niche on the world stage: spanning the century, singers like Peter Dawson, Billy Williams, Billy Thorpe and Kylie Minogue, and groups like Midnight Oil and the Seekers come to mind.

*{if opportunity, play a grab from a song by "The Seekers"}*

Admittedly, it's not quite the same as the Aeroplane Jelly song, but it's close!