

PRESERVING MOMENTS THAT MARKED THE HISTORY OF RADIO BROADCASTING

"Columbia University Libraries' Rare Book & Manuscript Library acquired legendary radio host Bob Fass's archive, an extensive collection of radio broadcasts, original photographs, and personal correspondence, in 2016. Highlights from the 600,000 minutes of broadcast footage include conversations with Bob Dylan, Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, offering in-depth, unfiltered insight into the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s. The recordings were stored on fragile tapes that were at risk of ruin and Memnon helped to preserve these unique audio recordings for the future."

Sean Quimby - Director of Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University



The Challenge

Columbia University, chose Memnon, a Sony company, to safeguard and provide access to over two decades' worth of audiotapes from the archive of groundbreaking broadcaster Bob Fass. The complex project was funded in various phases by a grant from the Council of Library and Information Resources and supplemented by a crowd-sourced fundraising initiative.

The goal of the project was to digitize and preserve deteriorating 1/4" reel-to-reel tapes and audio cassettes. The initial focus was to prioritize undated and unidentified recordings as well as those from the '60s and '70s. The recordings suffered from a variety of preservation issues due to less than ideal storage conditions and age. Many tapes needed extensive repair, treatment for mold, and unique playback methods to be transferred successfully.

A pioneer of "free form" radio for 50 years, Fass is best known for his late-night program Radio Unnameable. During the sixties it featured unscripted appearances by poets and musicians like Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan, and social activists like Abbie Hoffman and Timothy Leary – a forum where listeners could interact with their idols and one another.

In 1968 alone, Fass broadcast live events like the "Yip In" at Grand Central Station, Columbia University student protests, and the Chicago Democratic National convention. Now digitized, these recordings are a major resource in the study of how mass-media helped to mobilize dissent in late-twentieth century America.



<ck k Y\YdYX

H\fcI [\ h]g'dfc'YWz7c'i a V]U'1 b] Yfg]miUbX'A Ya bcb'GYfj]W'g' bW'k cf_YX'hc [Yh Yf'hc Ybgj fY h\Y'VYgh'dcgg]V'Y hfUbgZYfg'UbX' [i UfUbhYY'h\Y'i gY'UbX'VYbYZ]hcZ'h Ygy'j U'i UV'Y'fYVz'fX]b[g]b' h\Y'bYUf'Z' h fY"

8]U[bcg]g'"h\Y'Z]fgh'ghYd]b'h\Y'dfc'W'gg'k Ug'U'Vz'a dfY\Ybg]j Y' X]U[bcg]g'cZYUW' hJdY'"A Ya bcb'i gYX'U'j Uf]YfmcZ'hc'c'g]bW' X]b[' a U[bYh]W]]Yk Yfg'UbX'U'j Uf]YfmcZ'hJdY'a UW']bYg'hc'XYhYfa]bY' hfUW'Vz'bZ] [i fU]cb'UbX'ei U']m]'CbW'YUW' hJdY'k Ug'W'fYZ' 'mi Yj U'i UhYX'Ub'YI dYf]YbW'X'gci bX'Yb[]bYf'XYhYfa]bYX'h\Y'VYgh k Umhc'fYg'hc'fY'UbX'dfYgy'fj Y'YUW'fYVz'fX]b["'

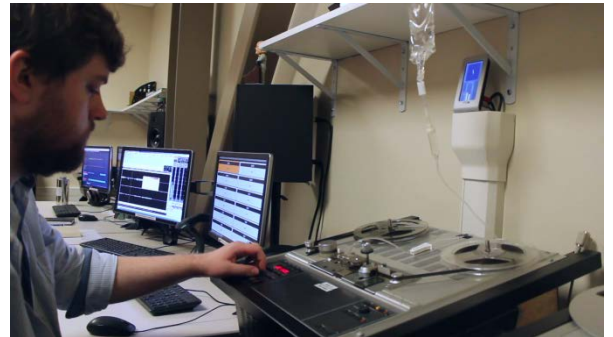
7'YU]b["'h\Y'bYI hghYd]b'h\Y'dfc'W'gg'k Ug'U'h\fcI [\ WYU]b['cZ'h\Y'a YX]U'"A Ya bcb'\Ug'XY] Y'cdYXZU'cb[' k]h' bX]UbU'1 b] Yfg]mz'U'WYU]b['gc'i h]cb'Zcf'a c'Xm' hJdYg'h UhYbUV'Yg]XYU'd'Un'UW'Vz'bX]h]cbg'k \]Y' d'fcj]X]b['U'gUZ'k cf_]b['Yb]]fcb'a Ybh'"

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY CASE STUDY

Repair. Many of the tapes required repairs. Open reel tapes frequently had to be carefully rewound onto reels and splices had to be replaced. Audio cassettes frequently required new pressure pads and/or new shells. Each repair was carefully made to ensure the best possible playback and to preserve the media in the best possible condition.

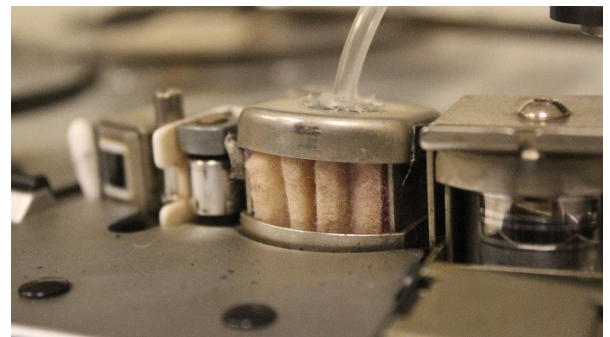


Digitization. Many of the tapes suffered from Soft Binder Syndrome, a condition that causes the tapes to badly squeal during playback. Not only does the squeal affect the recorded signal, there is also risk in damaging the tapes further. While some tapes responded to baking, a classic treatment protocol for squealing tapes, the vast majority did not. For those tapes that did not respond to baking Memnon built a special "wet transfer" machine. This machine was inspired by Marie O'Connell's guest article "Wet playing of reel tapes with Loss of Lubricant" featured on Richard Hess' website. This machine offered very significant improvements to all other conventional transfer methods.



"Many of the Fass tapes were in such poor condition I feared some would be completely unplayable. I was constantly impressed with our engineer's ability to restore and repair these tapes, and the effectiveness of our Lubricated Playback system. Knowing the condition the tapes arrived in makes listening to the intimate conversations Fass had with his guests and callers that much more rewarding."

-Ari Swartz



Postproduction. Finally, each recording was checked for quality and metadata was collected. Metadata included: Import of existing client data, Diagnosis notes, Digitization comments, Quality Control comments and Processing Information. Metadata was provided to Columbia as an XML file that was then imported into their system and available for researchers.

The Outcomes

The work carried out by Memnon on the Bob Fass Archive, beyond reflecting a commitment to the preservation of American culture, is another example of our ability to develop solutions that adapt to the needs of any organization or institution. Memnon delivered audio files of the highest quality coupled with rich metadata, going to great lengths to get the best possible sound recordings for intelligible and meaningful listening experiences. This valuable collection is now on the way to becoming accessible and discoverable and is no longer in danger of being lost forever.