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## Are We On the Right Track? Issues With LP Record Collections in U.S. Academic Libraries

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**Are We on the Right Track?**

**Issues with LP Record Collections in U.S. Academic Libraries**

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How can libraries ensure that our audio heritage residing on long playing records (LPs) will still be available in the future? Today there are 46.4 million sound recordings held in U.S. libraries, archives and museums,<sup>1</sup> and a large percentage of these recordings reside on LPs. While playing equipment is still available on the market, most users listen to music either on compact discs (CDs) or on MP3 players. Turntables are not yet obsolete but they are becoming less frequently used by each new generation of library users. College students are used to swapping files between their computers and MP3 players instead of placing the needle on LPs. As MP3 players have become more affordable, they become must-have items for every teenager and college student. These devices now allow anyone to carry thousands of songs for easy listening anywhere at any time. LPs do not offer this type of flexibility – they are big and bulky and, since many of our patrons no longer own turntables, the only place one can listen to them is in the library.

Why is the repertoire residing on LPs important for libraries? Libraries have acquired large LP collections and hold unique recordings that have never been released in digital format. Brooks found that only 14% of historic sound recordings issued between 1890 and 1964 were legally reissued on CD. These totals include early recordings issued on such formats as cylinders and 78 rpm discs as well. Since LPs were introduced on the market after World War II, limiting Brooks' data to the years 1950-1964 can give a more accurate percentage

for LP reissues. The data indicate that 57% of recordings from 1950-1964 never saw their commercial CD reissue.<sup>2</sup> Other studies have led to similar conclusions. For example, Munstedt, analyzing about 1,000 LPs donated to the MIT Music Library in 1993 noted that LPs “contain too much repertoire to abandon.”<sup>3</sup>

Libraries need to continue maintaining the physical carriers of analog music, but due to limited budgets, libraries also need to carefully consider what they keep in their collections. Moving some parts of the library collection to off-site storage facilities, switching journal subscriptions from print to online, and using compact shelving all help in lowering building maintenance costs. How can libraries then justify keeping their large analog audio collections on the shelves? What criteria can be used in deciding what to preserve, what to digitize, what to deselect? The authors’ survey seeks to provide data to assist librarians in answering these questions by gathering information on current library practices related to the collection development issues of LPs, such as handling, maintenance, storage, and digitization. This article will discuss how libraries of varying sizes are dealing with these issues as well as the various factors librarians consider in their collection management decisions about this particular analog format in the digital age.

## METHODOLOGY

Our survey was created to understand the collection development, preservation, and circulation practices of LPs in a wide variety of U.S. academic libraries. In September 2007, institutional members of the Music Library Association (MLA) plus large institutions known to have large music programs were contacted via e-mail with a request to participate in the survey. MLA institutional members were found in the 2007 Membership Handbook. Large institutions with large music programs were found in the 2007 Directory of the National Association of Schools of Music. The e-mail, with a link to the survey, was distributed to 238 individuals. One of the following was identified at each institution (in order of preference): music librarian, Music Department liaison or music subject specialist, collection development librarian, or library director. These names were found on each institution's web site.

## RESULTS

### **Demographics**

Survey responses were received from eighty-four institutions, a return of 35%. Sixty-eight or 81% are from universities and thirteen or 15% are from four-year colleges, with one from a seminary, and one from a conservatory. Since both the seminary and the conservatory have large LP collections, their responses were included in all data analysis. Full-time equivalent enrollment at these institutions

ranges from 1,200 to 65,000, with a median of 12,000 and an average of 16,176. Thirty-nine (46%) respondents have a separate music library while thirty-one (37%) do not. An additional fourteen (17%) indicated that they have a separate music section or library within the main library, a music library combined with other arts (e.g. Fine Arts Library), or collections housed in the Music Department. Not surprisingly, institutions with larger music programs are much more likely to have a separate music library, although just under half of the institutions with small music programs have a separate music library as well. The size of the acquisitions budget for recordings at these institutions ranges from zero to \$45,000, with an average of \$8,860. One respondent commented, “I’m spending less and less on sound recordings every year due to the number of subscriptions for streamed audio products.”

### **General collection information**

Eighty-two (97%) respondents reported having an LP collection, including one library with LPs located in departmental libraries and another with only a small collection of LPs held in their special collections. The size of the LP collections ranges from 250 to 175,000, with an average of 18,510. Just over half of respondents (59%) reported that their LP collection is fully cataloged, including three respondents noting that their LP collections are only cataloged on cards not in the online catalog. Thirty-two libraries, with collective LP holdings of

about 760,000 LPs, indicated that their collection is not fully cataloged. The percentage of uncataloged LPs in these libraries ranges between 1% and 100%, with an average of 52%. The total number of uncataloged LPs is about 400,000, or over 27% of all LPs held among libraries participating in the survey.

### **Location/Circulation**

In 1991, Jim Farrington listed four basic requirements to consider when storing audio discs and tapes: controlled environment (including temperature, humidity, and pollution control); shelving (grounded shelving recommended with full-sized dividers on the shelves); storage location (should be selected away from sources of water leakage); and lighting (no exposure to ultraviolet lights or direct sunlight).<sup>4</sup> Survey responses reveal that thirty-three libraries consider space as the major issue in the storage of LPs. Other concerns mentioned include maintaining ideal conditions for the storage of LPs and expenses associated with environmental control; finding proper shelving or specially constructed trays; cost of remote storage; and the weight of these collections (see fig. 1).

The majority of libraries (44%) in our survey hold the LP collections in their music library, while 24% of the libraries house theirs in the main library. Only 12% house their LP collections solely in storage. The remaining 18% house their collections in another location, such as special collections, or have their collection split, such as between the main library and storage. The libraries who

house their collections partly or solely in storage are evenly split between those with small, medium, or large LP collections. Interestingly, there is no correlation between the reported size of the respondent's music collections and problems with LP storage. In fact, the library with the smallest reported collection noted that they did have storage problems, whereas the library with the largest reported collection responded that they did not have problems with LP storage.

Some of the comments of those reporting no storage problems were:

- "... [A] new room was added to the library ... It is used for storage of LPs and gifts."
- "No, we have very quick delivery from storage, usually same day or within 24 hours."

Those institutions that did report storage problems have very similar concerns, noting that the LPs are "taking up valuable real estate" and "we are over capacity load." Other comments:

- "Storage is scarce, but we will not weed based on space."
- "... We need time/resources to check them so we don't discard any 'gems.'"
- "They take up a lot of space that could be used for other materials that get far greater use."



- “The LPs are boxed and in closets. They are not accessible, nor are their records (fully cataloged) available by checking the catalog. These records are suppressed [sic] from public viewing.”

Farrington also recommended that audio discs and tapes be stored in closed stacks since this allows libraries to offer more protection by limiting their exposure to damage.<sup>5</sup> Over half of the surveyed collections (57%) hold the LPs in closed stacks. Those institutions with a separate music library are more likely to have their LPs in closed stacks. However, over half of the responding libraries (51%) reported that they allow LPs to circulate, with an additional 20% noting that LPs circulate to faculty and/or graduate students only. When asked if they had performed a usage study on their LP collection, over 75% responded that they had not. Of those who had, most retrieved information based on circulation statistics or, in the case of those with smaller collections, monitoring usage.

Survey responses revealed that 93% of libraries provided playback equipment for their patrons. The number of turntables ranged between 1 and 15, with an average of 4.84 turntables among respondents.

A number of respondents commented that the use of LPs is making a resurgence among their students, some even calling them “cool” and preferring the sound quality. One mentioned that he demonstrates use of turntables in some music classes. Another noted that his library provides signage and instruction on how to properly use LPs.

## **Collection Management**

Over half of the respondents (55%) noted that they do not currently add to their LP collection, while 23% do. Of the 20% responding “other,” most noted that they add LPs in rare situations, such as with donations or a “political gift” (see fig. 2).

However, when asked if they accept gifts, forty-four (54%) respondents answered with a qualified yes. The qualifications fall into four broad categories: recordings that are important, unique, rare, or fit a specialized scope of the collection; political reasons; recordings of institutional or local interest; and unconditional gifts. Smaller institutions are less likely to add to their LP collection than mid-sized or larger schools. Of the schools with low enrollment (1,200-5,000 students), 85% do not add to their LP collection at all.

Over 70% of respondents reported that they weed their LP collection. Of the twelve libraries responding “other,” eleven weed rarely, occasionally, as needed, or have already completed a weeding project. Those institutions with smaller collections weed more than those with larger collections (see fig. 3).

Respondents were asked to choose all those applicable from a list of criteria used when making weeding decisions. Responses were as follows:

- Multiple copies: 62%
- Availability on CD: 58%

- Damage (i.e. scratches, mold, etc.): 58%
- Recordings of local significance: 30%
- Quality of performance (i.e. poorly reviewed): 24%
- Relation to curriculum (i.e. outside scope): 24%
- Reserve usage: 21%
- Circulation statistics: 19%
- Number of OCLC holdings: 11%
- Consortial retention policy: 2%

Other criteria mentioned by respondents were historical significance, special genres, and exceptional liner notes. Comments on weeding varied widely, from one library noting that they “are committed to archiving historic sound recordings” to another stating, “I weed [the LP collection] aggressively.” Many noted that the lack of time, staff, and money prevented them from weeding as much as they would like.

When asked if they had an active program to replace LPs with CDs, only 24% responded yes, with 54% responding no. Of those responding “other,” ten noted that they replace LPs on an as-needed basis, based on criteria such as circulation, reserves, or faculty requests. Three respondents noted that they needed to start such a project, while one noted that “this process is complete.” The average amount of money spent on this type of project ranged from none to \$5,000, with an average of \$1,322.

A multiple-answer question asked survey respondents how they handle important recordings available on LPs only. Respondents were allowed to check all applicable choices from the following four options: keep, digitize (i.e. make a CD copy), stream (i.e. create an MP3-type file available online only), and other. Seventy-five (89%) respondents indicated that they keep these LPs in their collection, sixteen libraries (19%) digitize them, and ten (11%) create files for streaming. Only three of the respondents indicated that they engage both in digitization of LPs and streaming of LPs. “Other” responses included moving the recordings to special collections, digitization of LPs only by request, or creating analog or digital copies for researches if copying falls within fair use. While one respondent indicated that staffing constraints limit their ability to digitize, data indicates that overall there is no correlation between staffing levels and digitization of analog records. Those who digitize LPs have an average of 5.10 FTE music staff while those who do not have 4.99 FTE music staff. Similar observation can be made about those libraries that stream music. The libraries that stream music have an average of 4.75 FTE music staff while those who do not have 5.07 FTE staff. While it would be of interest to determine the availability of digitization equipment and software, this question was not asked in the survey.

Respondents were asked how involved the Music Department faculty are in collection development decisions regarding sound recordings. Responses ranged from “very involved” to “not involved.” The majority (38%) are

“infrequently” or “somewhat” involved, while 29% reported that faculty only get involved with they need materials for the classroom or research. A few mentioned that music faculty are involved in advising on withdrawal decisions.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the libraries surveyed, approximately 75% of LPs are cataloged. What do we do with the other 25%? The sheer amount of uncataloged LPs will cause problems for many libraries. Our survey shows that libraries may have uncataloged collections exceeding 10,000 LPs. Without catalog records these items are hidden from our users and with our users’ preference for digital music and the inconvenience of turntables, very little future use of these items can be expected. The Association for Library Collections & Technical Services Collection Management and Development Section’s guidelines state, “Materials are stored if little use is predicted in the future and if they have potential value to some clientele, whereas they are deselected if they have lost their utility to users.”<sup>6</sup> Have these items “lost their utility to users” just because they are uncataloged and in an unpopular format? Some of these items may have unique content that is only available in this format. Many groups, including the Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control, have recently highlighted “hidden collections” and are advocating making the discovery of

these a high priority.<sup>7</sup> While twenty-three of the libraries with uncataloged collections are planning to catalog their LPs, processing these large collections will take considerable time, and justifying keeping unused collections will become more difficult.

Our survey results support earlier findings reported in CLIR report 128, *Survey of the State of Audio Collections in Academic Libraries*, indicating that the biggest barrier to access is lack of bibliographic control. In this report, Smith states that audio collections are often underused because they are not described or inventoried, their playback equipment has become obsolete, and clearly documented rights that allow use are lacking. In the same report the authors concluded that the National Recording Preservation Board should address “how to enable libraries to share digital audio files so that rare materials can be more accessible. This is essential for a cost-effective means of preservation to be scaled across a network of preserving institutions.”<sup>8</sup>

The National Recording Preservation Board (NRPB) was created by the National Recordings Preservation Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-474) to study “current laws and restrictions regarding the use of archives of sound recordings, including recommendations for changes in such laws and restrictions to enable the Library of Congress and other nonprofit institutions in the field of sound recording preservation to make their collections available to researchers in a digital format.”<sup>9</sup> The NRPB has commissioned several reports, conducted public

hearings, and organized meetings focusing on current sound recording preservation activities, copyright issues, and technological challenges related to the preservation of analog recordings.

One of the studies commissioned by the NRPB is Besek's detailed analysis of copyright law highlighting the complexity of issues related to sound recordings. Besek's study examines the application of federal and state laws for copyright of sound recordings and concludes that "preservation efforts with respect to pre-1972 sounds recordings are hampered by legal restrictions."<sup>10</sup> She provides the example of LPs and 78-rpm records that are not eligible for preservation copying as "obsolete." Qualifying libraries may copy published works fixed or recorded after 1972 "to replace a work in their collections that is damaged, deteriorating, lost, or stolen, or whose format has become obsolete, if the library determines after reasonable effort that an unused replacement cannot be obtained at a fair price," and "copies in digital format may not be made available to the public outside the library premises."<sup>11</sup> She also points out that "preservation efforts are also hindered by significant ambiguities in the law"<sup>12</sup> such as the definitions of "reasonable" effort and "library premises". Besek advocates collaboration, recommending that libraries "pool their resources to investigate such questions as the copyright status of a work and whether it is currently available on the market or subject to commercial exploitation, or to create databases with information concerning works maintained in digital form

that can serve as resources for libraries whose copies of those works have been lost or stolen, or have otherwise become unavailable.”<sup>13</sup>

Our survey found only sixteen libraries digitizing LPs by copying the recording to a CD and ten who created digital files for streaming. In 2003, Griscom found that libraries were digitizing for preservation and access. Fourteen libraries in his survey were digitizing “audio as a means of preservation” for noncommercial historical recordings, tapes of local performances, rare 78 rpm discs, and field recordings on wax cylinders while thirty-nine libraries were engaged in digitization efforts, specifically streaming for class reserves that resulted in enhanced access. He noted that “content for reserve listening is taken from compact discs, LPs, and sometimes tape recordings.”<sup>14</sup>

The extent of LP digitization efforts in libraries varies widely and is partly dependent on how much risk libraries are willing to assume. Some libraries may rely on fair use or on such library exceptions as preservation copying, while others are taking a more conservative approach.

## CONCLUSION

Libraries have an important role in ensuring that their rich audio collections remain accessible to future generations. Libraries have large LP collections, large uncataloged collections, limited resources to manage these



sound collections, and are faced with storage problems. Migrating and reformatting of sound recordings residing on LPs require staff expertise, time, equipment, or if the project is outsourced to a vendor, funding. Unfortunately most libraries do not have sufficient resources to engage in large-scale audio conversion projects. However, it is important to know what we have in our collections so we can identify unique items and allocate resources to preserve or digitize those that have significant historical value. Librarians should also share information about their digitized LP recordings to eliminate redundancy in digitization efforts.

Based on our research 38% of the libraries in our survey have uncataloged LP collections. These libraries should follow the Library of Congress recommendation and make them a cataloging priority since inventory is the first step in any preservation project. They should try to identify funds and resources to evaluate these collections, free up storage space by weeding unwanted items and process potentially unique, currently hidden sound recordings.

More libraries should conduct usage studies of their LP collections. Usage data can be valuable in making decisions about weeding, replacement, preservation, digitization, or off-site storage moves. In addition, music librarians need to advocate for change in copyright and ensure that the National Recording Preservation Board is aware of the issues libraries face and can make

recommendations so that copyright law would have fewer restrictions on library digitization projects.

## NOTES

Andrea Imre is the Electronic Resources Librarian and Elizabeth Cox is the Special Formats Cataloger, both at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and have served as liaisons to the SIU Music Department.

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**Legends for illustrations:**

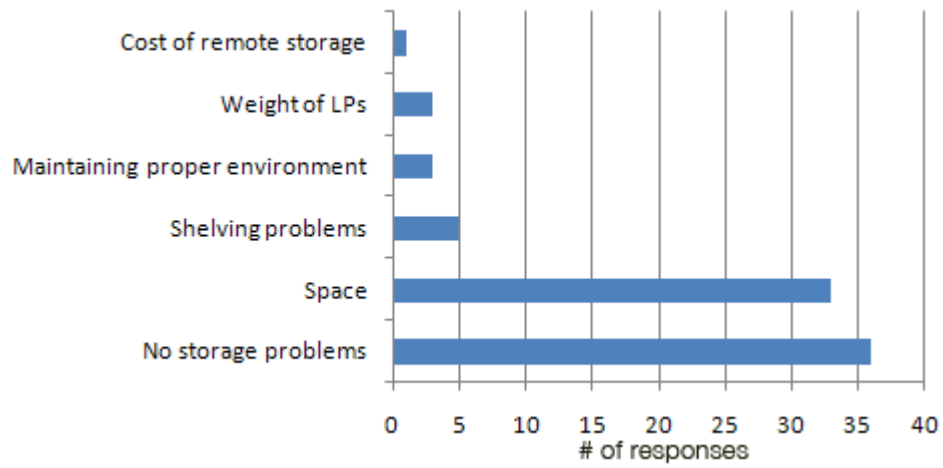


Fig. 1. Issues with storage of LPs

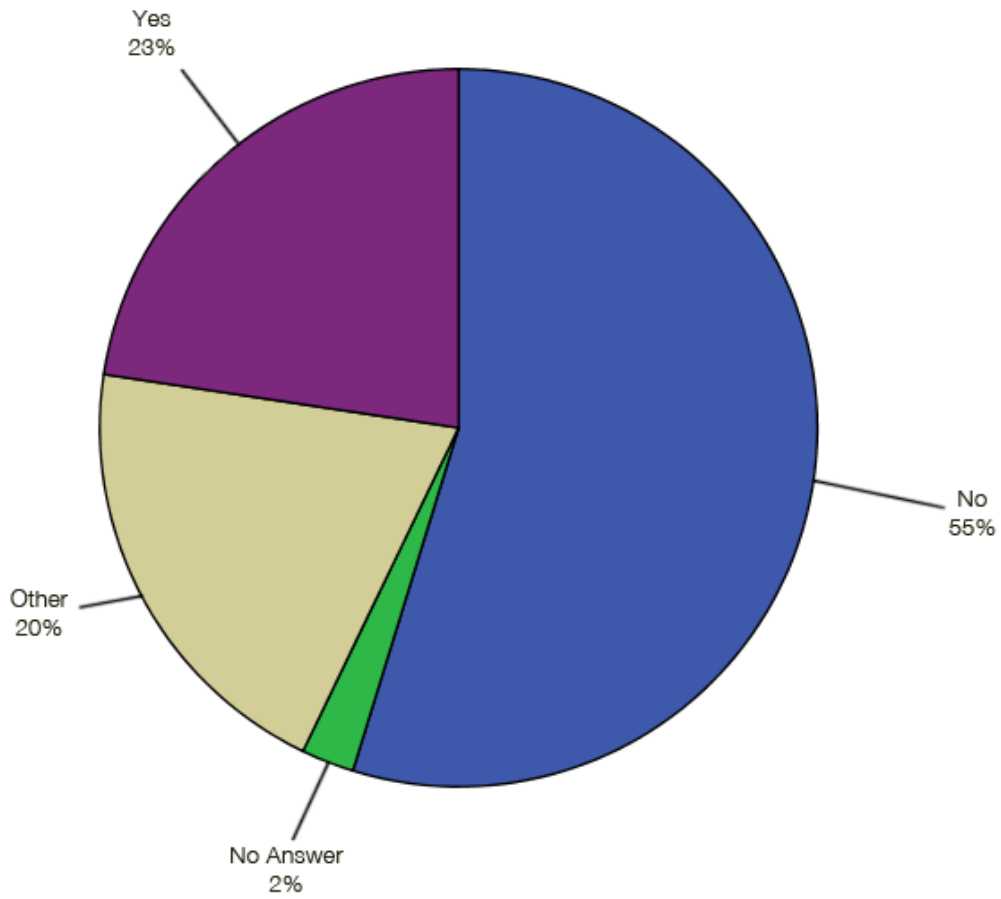


Fig. 2. Answers to survey question regarding additions to LP collections

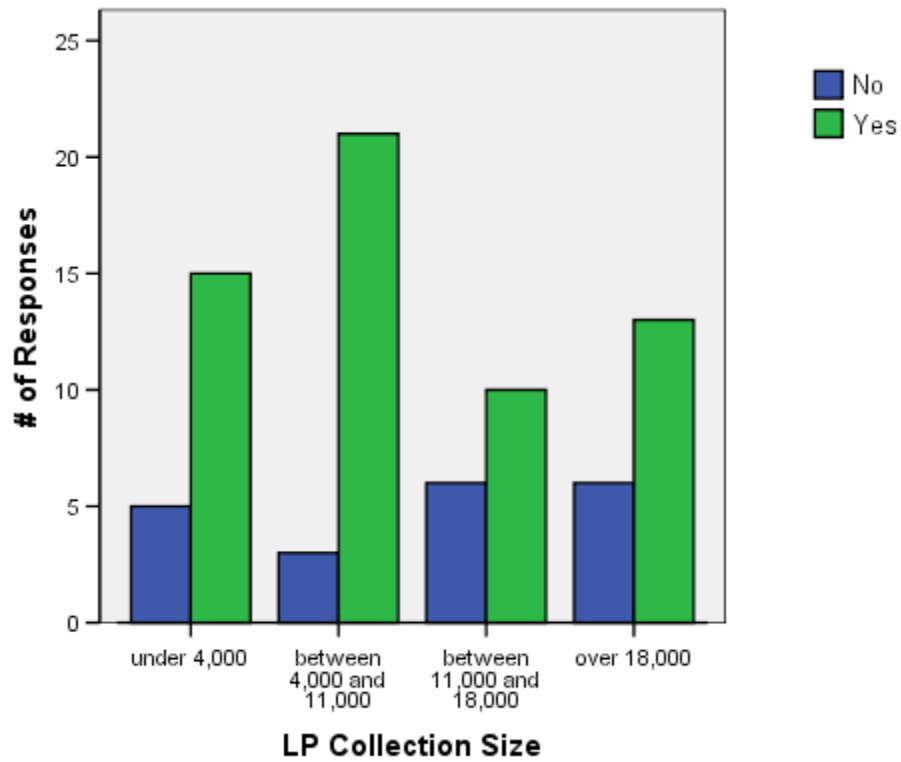


Fig. 3. Correlation between size of LP collection and weeding practices