

Understanding Management and Use of Ethnographic Sound Archives

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Abstract: Audio collections present significant challenges for archives and special collections, yet the management and use of these materials remains under-researched in the spectrum of archival studies. This project investigates the changing needs of researchers and archivists in the realm of audiovisual archiving by presenting results from an ongoing qualitative study of management and use in ethnographic sound archives. In order to better understand audiovisual archiving needs, I will present preliminary findings from a series of semi-structured interviews with archivists and researchers that sketch a clearer picture of challenges for ethnographic sound archives, a significant subset of audiovisual archives.

The presentation offers data and results from ongoing interviews that address questions regarding tensions between archival management and research use. The study focuses on researchers from the discipline of ethnomusicology, which Jeff Todd Titon defines as “the study of people making music,” since scholars in this discipline actively produce (and often reuse) ethnographic field recordings. Ultimately, this research provides a richer description of the use of sound recordings in ethnomusicological work, deeper understanding of how ethnomusicologists view such use, and critically assesses the role of archives in ethnomusicology by drawing on the worldviews of practicing scholars, broadly defined. The research is part of an ongoing study of ethnomusicologists and their work methods and is conducted in the spirit of elucidating “what ethnomusicologists do” by asking and observing. More broadly, the aim is to move toward a general understanding of research use for sound materials in archives.

About the author:

Jesse A. Johnston holds an MSI in archives and a PhD in musicology from the University of Michigan. His music research focuses on the post-1991 resurgence of cimbalom-playing culture in postsocialist Moravia. His current project on ethnographic audio archives stems from his work as a Master’s student at the University of Michigan, where he focused on audiovisual archiving, digital preservation, and digital humanities. This work was inspired directly by his doctoral research in Czech radio archives and interest in ethnographic sound recordings.

Johnston previously taught courses in musicology at Bowling Green State University and the University of Michigan–Dearborn. His research interests include performance studies, ethnomusicology, music cultures in Southeast Asia, and the anthropology of technology. He has given lectures at Oxford University and the University of the Philippines, presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology, the International Council on Traditional Music, and the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, and published in the *Journal of the American Musical Instrument*

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