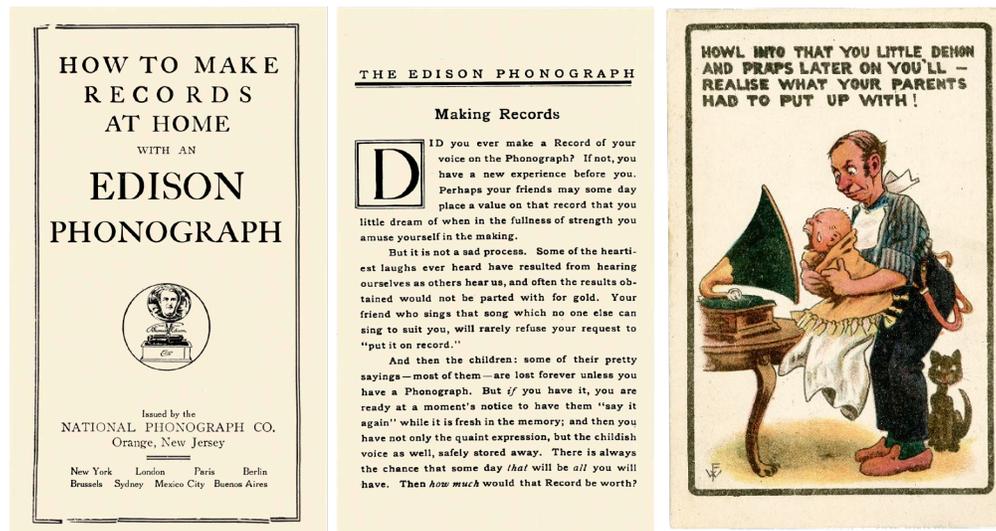


Vernacular Wax Cylinder Recordings at UC Santa Barbara Library (c. 1890-1920)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by David Giovannoni (guest post)*



Most recordings celebrated by the National Recording Registry are of two types: studio recordings made for commercial sale and home entertainment, or field recordings made by ethnographers for documentation and study.

A third and quite different type of recording is recognized by this entry. These are the records that ordinary people made in their own homes for their own ends. And although our ancestors did not intend them as such, these home-made, or “vernacular,” recordings are recognized today as unique and important cultural artifacts. As one expert has written:

Commercial and field recordings were made for specific purposes and shaped with those purposes in mind. The recording industry captured stuff it hoped would sell, while fieldworkers gathered materials of interest to the academy. By contrast, home recordings were made by families and groups of friends for their own use and enjoyment. The act of recording at home didn't intrude on the content or context as it did in the other cases. We hear only what people chose to record for themselves when they were in charge of the equipment and not being told by a stranger what to do or how to do it.¹

Cylinder phonographs first entered the parlor in the late 1890s and stayed until displaced by newer technologies in the 1920s. They brought professional entertainers into our homes and let us command their performances at will. They also gave us the power to record. For the first time in human history we could take sonic selfies, audio snapshots with friends, and aural portraits of loved ones. Our phonographs captured the sounds of everyday life, both silly and serious: the baby's squalling, Johnny's naughty joke, Grandma's favorite hymn as only she could sing it, our letters to loved ones in foreign lands or 100 years in the future. In our own homes we spoke unfettered

¹ Patrick Feaster, *Vernacular Wax Cylinder Recordings at the UCSB Library*.

by commercial concerns or ethnographers' expectations. Our phonographs observed who we were and what we valued without interference or judgement.

In this way home recordings are among the most authentic audio documents of the period. They are also among the most precious. For decades they were ignored by sound archives, and worse, traded by private collectors for the value of their wax, their recordings irretrievably erased. It was decades before a few prescient collectors recognized home recordings as anthropological artifacts and started sedulously salvaging every specimen they could secure.

UCSB's Cylinder Audio Archive signaled the significance of vernacular wax cylinders when it acquired a premiere private collection in 2013. UCSB's commitment to building this collection encourages all collectors, both public and private, to recognize and assertively preserve this endangered audio heritage.

For more information: <https://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/homewax.php>

David Giovannoni specializes in the history, preservation, and dissemination of pioneer audio recordings. His personal collection can be heard at The Library of Historical Audio Recordings at i78s, the Library of Congress' National Jukebox, and on numerous historical reissues on CD and vinyl. His writing and audio restoration work have earned him nine Grammy nominations and one Grammy.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.