

# **Preserving Oral History: A Collaborative Approach to Processing Obsolete Media**

Drew Adan, The University of Alabama in Huntsville

## **Abstract**

Over the past 60 years, oral history interviews have been recorded on a number of now obsolete formats with varied challenges in terms of their preservation and access. This presentation offers a case study in the successful implementation of an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to the preservation of our oral history recordings relating to the history of space exploration. At The University of Alabama in Huntsville Archives & Special Collections we have begun a collaborative project with the Music Technology Program to digitize and restore these recordings that are endangered by media obsolescence and material degradation. Through this interdepartmental partnership we have been able to not only gain access to the hardware, software, and expertise necessary to preserve oral history interviews, but also provide Music Technology students with a meaningful and marketable project to put their skills to use. This project has also proved to be quite an effective outreach tool as it has exposed students from disparate academic disciplines to our archival holdings on the topic of space history and beyond.

This presentation will document the origins, challenges, and outcomes of this project and offer suggestions as to how this might be implemented at other academic institutions, government repositories, or private collections.

## **Summary**

The genesis of this project lies in a series of oral history interviews conducted in conjunction with Roger Bilstein's *Stages to Saturn* and other contemporary histories of the Saturn/Apollo Program. In the early nineteen seventies, David L. Christensen

traveled the country recording oral history interviews with influential figures in rocket development. These included notable Operation Paperclip scientists such as Konrad Dannenberg, Walter Dornberger, Arthur Rudolph, and Wernher von Braun. The recordings offer an unusually intimate glimpse into the lives and careers of these men, as the topics of conversation range from highly technical explanations of their contributions to the field of rocketry to amusing anecdotes from their home or personal lives.

Enhancing access to these interviews presented a unique set of challenges from the onset. To start, there was very little intellectual control. We had the name of the interviewee and sometimes a date listed on the folder or cassette, but very little descriptive or technical metadata such as duration, location of recording, or the topics covered. Next was the obvious challenges one confronts when dealing with obsolete magnetic media, scarcity of playback hardware and the unavoidable degradation of tape over time. A few sources I checked placed the lifespan of an analog audio cassette between ten and thirty years, but these were largely serviceable after almost fifty years. Only one single tape was unplayable. Another problem we encountered was specific to these tapes. In order to maximize available recording space, Christensen did not do one interview per tape, but rather picked up where another interview had left off and wrote percentage values on the outside of the tape. Lastly, many of the interviews were either deafening loud and distorted or barely audible. We assume Christensen was using a detachable wired microphone and moved it around throughout the course of the interview.

Previous attempts to provide access to these tapes encountered some roadblocks. The first attempt was actually done by Christensen himself who attempted to transcribe all of the interviews. This is, of course, tedious and time consuming work and he managed to make it through roughly a quarter of the collection. The first attempt to digitize was done a few years ago with a poor quality handheld USB cassette player. These files sounded grainy and the player was susceptible to interference from cell phones and other devices. Students then used the free audio editing software Audacity to clean up the files, but they lacked the tools and expertise properly enhance the audio recordings.

A little over a month after joining the team at UAH Archives & Special Collections, I was tasked with digitizing these files at the request of Christensen himself. During a conversation with one of our interns, I learned that UAH has a music technology program. So I reached out to studio manager and professor Matt Westmeyer about collaborating on this project and he was quite enthusiastic about the opportunity it offered his students. We proposed a basic workflow that involved me digitizing raw .wav files from the cassettes, uploading them to a shared drive for four music technology students to edit, and finally the publication of use copies on the UAH archives website.

So far the benefits of this project have been numerous. Students get to put their skills to use on a marketable project, Archivists increase intellectual control of the collection and improve access, and researchers get a use copy of enhanced audio quality with robust metadata and access points. Often times as archivists we seek complete mastery of our collections and attempt to gather all of the equipment and expertise necessary for their maintenance. While this is a noble goal, I believe it can be counterproductive as these resources are often available in the community. A project like this is a great way to engage with departments or organizations outside of the usual patron base. I reached out to public universities across the state of Alabama and found that most music technology programs were quite interested in being involved in similar projects. However, anyone interested in a such collaboration need not limit themselves to academia. A wealth of knowledge and hardware exists in local technology enthusiast organizations such as Makers Local and others. I encourage all stewards of endangered audiovisual material to consider collaborative care for your collections.