

Collectormania!

COLLECTING RADIO SHOW TRANSCRIPTIONS: THE DELETERIOUS EFFECTS OF MP3 AND CD-Rs by Chuck Miller

They are some of the most difficult records to find and some of the easiest recordings to acquire. Their print runs are maddeningly low, with only a few pressings surviving in the hands of eager hobbyists. Yet their availability is also maddeningly high, where a fortunate collector can get hundreds of recordings for only a few dollars.

Welcome to the world of old-time radio collecting, where the existence of a few fragile acetates and syndicated recorded "episodes" were part of a radio station's broadcast schedule. During the 1930s, in the early days of radio, 16-inch transcription discs were used by stations to either broadcast recorded programming or as reference discs to archive a station's program for future broadcast or historical preservation.

The earliest aluminum transcription discs date back to 1932, when Western Electric and RCA Victor manufactured a 16-inch, 33 1/3 rpm disc for radio stations. It was common for a station employee to "record" news broadcasts, commercials and in-studio performances, which could be replayed. To denote the discs as station property, radio stations could apply custom-printed labels to the discs to note rotation speed (33 1/3 to 78 rpm), the needle cut (vertical or lateral), and whether the groove started at the edge of the record, to work its way in, or at the label, to work its way out. Despite the strength and durability of aluminum discs, the grooves are fragile and can be played only a few times before the needle wears them away.

Many original radio acetates may be the only copies of a broadcast in existence. In these cases, their value is determined by the record's content and its historic information contained in its grooves. That being said, 16-inch acetate discs must be played on a special phonograph with a 24-inch tonearm. KAB Electronics of New Jersey manufactures a modern turntable that can play 16-inch acetate discs and is available at its Web site (www.kabusa.com).

For collectors of old-time radio, finding a long-lost episode of a rare broadcast is a treasure to behold. Henry Sapoznik's discovery of hundreds of acetates chronicling Yiddish radio broadcasts in post-Depression New York City turned into the successful National Public Radio series *The Yiddish Radio Project*. In the 1960s, David Golden, an engineer at CBS, rescued hundreds of reels of audiotape from the CBS dumpsters, including several examples of the Golden Age Of Radio. In fall 2003, 15 long-lost episodes of the rare *Popeye The Sailor* radio show surfaced on fragile 78s. (In the series, Popeye does not gain his strength from a can of spinach; he instead develops muscles by eating bowls of Wheatena breakfast cereal, his show's sponsor).

The collectibility of these fragile gems, however, has been tainted by the recording industry's original bugaboo — the MP3 digital-audio data file. Under the misguided belief that old radio shows are older than any copyright laws that might protect them, some parties have gathered hundreds of episodes of prime-time serials, soaps, comedy shows and dramas, compressed these episodes to low-quality MP3s (in some cases, as low as 24kbps), burned as many MP3s as will fit on a CD-R, and flooded Internet auction sites with the digital equivalent of printing their own money.

For example, simply typing the initials "OTR" (for old-time radio) in the eBay search engine can pull up more than 3,000 auctions of CD-Rs and DVD-Rs filled with classic radio

broadcasts. One can purchase 852 episodes of *The Jack Benny Show* on seven CD-Rs, 286 episodes of *Amos And Andy* on two CD-Rs, 64 episodes of *Abbott And Costello* on one CD-R for \$2.98 plus shipping, and 18,000 episodes of various shows on 16 DVDs for \$60 plus shipping (do you have 18,000 free hours to listen to all this?).

"When somebody uses these programs without paying the artists and without spending the time and effort to clean them up," said John F. Levy, executive vice president and chief financial officer of Mediabay Inc., "those people are doing an injustice to the great writers, directors and performers of the programs. The quality of those episodes are either non-listenable or incomprehensible, and people who purchase those programs are throwing their money away."

Mediabay Inc.'s Radiospirits.com division offers a licensed, online subscription service for fans of old-time radio. Levy said it takes a lot of time and effort to bring 1930s and 1940s broadcasts to the digital age. His company sells boxed cassette and CD sets of shows such as *Fibber McGee And Molly*, *The*

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— Himan Brown, producer of Inner Sanctum**

Shadow and *The Jack Benny Show* at outlets such as Wal-Mart, Cracker Barrel and on its Web site (www.radiospirits.com).

"We feel that the estate of Jack Benny or the estates of Abbott and Costello have the right to benefit when people enjoy those programs," Levy said, "and we believe that the licenses and copyrights that we have are valid. Hobbyists and enthusiasts who want to trade programming, that's wonderful. Without them, there wouldn't be any old-time radio. But once somebody's trying to sell it and make a profit when they don't hold the copyright to do so, that's where it crosses the line."

For an experiment, I decided to purchase a collection from an online eBay auction. Granted, I'm not old enough to recall weekly broadcasts of *Lights Out* or *One Man's Family*, but I do remember listening every night to the *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, an hour-long anthology drama and suspense series hosted by E.G. Marshall. A seller offered several collections of old-time radio episodes, including shows such as *Dimension X*, *Lux Radio Theater* and *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*. Several people spent nearly \$200 apiece to acquire these burned CDs, and I decided to get into the act. A total of \$185 and a few days later, I received a box of 27 CDs, each in its own individual slimline jewel box, all packed with enough episodes of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* for nearly a year of listening without repeating an episode.

Right from the start, there were problems. Some of the episodes still had their commercials and newscasts from their original broadcasts; others had such poor sound quality I almost thought I was listening to it through a transistor radio. One episode, "The Thomas Jefferson Defense," actually started with that introduction but played a different episode. The

graphics on the CD jewel boxes looked as if they were printed off a home computer. And an Adobe PDF file featuring capsule episode synopses was actually heisted from an online fan site.

"After a careful search of the Library Of Congress and the United States copyright office," said the seller on his auction page, "it has been determined that the contents of this auction are in the public domain and the original copyrights have expired. If any of this material is thought not to be in the public domain, please advise us with proof so that we may confirm and remove the material. We are in compliance with the new eBay CD-R/DVD-R media policy falling under the exception rule that the underlying material is in the public domain."

Actually, the show's producer, Himan Brown, claims to hold the copyrights for every episode of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, and several episodes have been reissued in National Public Radio broadcasts. For him, the rebroadcast and resale of his classic radio shows are at once frustrating, offensive and painful. "How do you stop these thieves?" he asked. "It's the most vicious crooking that I can possibly mention. They hide behind post office box numbers, you chase them all across the country, you get a summons and a marshal to arrest them for theft, and by the time you get a lawyer, it's \$500 an hour. What these people are doing is the worst kind of thievery that you can think of."

As for the claim that the copyright on his radio shows has expired, Brown said that not only does he hold the copyrights to the broadcasts and the scripts, he also holds the copyright on certain sound effects used in the show. "The opening sound on each episode, the creaking door, I have a trademark for that sound. It was one of the very first sounds. I started that creaking door with *Inner Sanctum* and continued it with the *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*. Everybody's entitled to a royalty for their work — the actors, the writers — and these thieves cheat people out of those royalties."

On his Web site (www.himanbrown.com), he has tried to gather a mailing list of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater* enthusiasts, with the future possibility of releasing episodes from the series by subscription, "but the feedback is that many people would prefer a couple of discs of MP3s of [the show]. We are aware that if you want to find that you can join a collector's group and find it easily."

In fact, if you're looking for episodes of *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, an online club does exist for the show (www.cbsrmt.info), and collectors are more than willing to trade episodes for free.

What's your take on collecting old-time radio shows? Are you satisfied with CD-Rs filled with hundreds of hours of episodes, or are you willing to pay extra for remastered, licensed classic drama and comedy?

Drop me a line and let me know what you think. You can reach me at *Goldmine/Collectormania!*, 700 E. State St., Iola WI 54990-0001, or at my Web site (www.chuckthewriter.com).

Hidden Track EPs

Here are four artists on an imaginary EP. What is the common theme? The fifth is a bonus track that has something to do with the previous four, but what? The answers will be run in next month's *Collectormania!* For those who just can't wait to find the answer, we'll post it on our Web site at www.goldminemag.com or www.collect.com/records.

Here's the listing of this month's *Hidden Track EP*:

Johnny Horton
Jimmy Dean
Gordon Lightfoot
Celine Dion

Hidden track: Maureen McGovern

Do you know what these artists have in common? Stay tuned to *Collectormania!* for the answer and next month's *Hidden Track EP*.

Answer to #623's *Hidden Track EP*: Steve Miller Band, "Jet Airliner"; Pink Floyd, "Money"; The Knack, "Good Girls Don't"; and Lou Reed, "Walk On The Wild Side" are songs that had certain words removed for content on the 45 rpm pressing. The hidden track, Radiohead, "Creep," is a song that kept its lyrical content intact on the 45. It was cleaned up for the music video, for radio, for almost every audio outlet except the 45 and the CD.