

September 5, 2013 5:18 pm

## Sounds for future reference



By Emma Jacobs



Got it taped: Will Prentice

The voice of Eric Blair, better known by his pen name, George Orwell, tops the list of Will Prentice's most sought-after recordings. Incredibly, there are no surviving audio clips of the writer who once worked as a presenter for the BBC.

To hear his voice would make our understanding and memory of the writer more complete, says Mr Prentice. Sound recordings are like "postcards from a moment in time" to Mr Prentice, who oversees their preservation at the British Library. "It's a very modest form of time travel."

The emotional power of hearing a voice is immense for Mr Prentice. The 46-year-old recalls a request from an elderly woman to find a recording of a song by her father, a crooner in the interwar period. Tears come to his eyes recalling the effect it had on her.

Public libraries are going through a difficult time, says Mr Prentice. Their budgets have been slashed while some argue that their role is redundant as the internet has made information easily available. It raises existential questions for those that work in them. "What does the world expect from a library?" he says. "Who wants us and what is our purpose?"

The purpose of his department is to "preserve the audible memory of the nation" by storing records, cassettes and mini-disc recordings digitally. His office is strewn with huge audio players – clunky pieces of equipment such as reel-to-reel players – which he connects to digital recorders.

Unlike print, there is no legal requirement in the UK to keep audio material, so Mr Prentice

relies heavily on donations from record companies, sound recordists and researchers who make their own unpublished recordings. "We would like to have, ideally, two copies of every sound recording made in the UK or even that relates to UK culture."

As technology has made recording cheaper and easier, the amount of audio material has increased, which means curation is increasingly important. "You need to distinguish between – to use an audio analogy – signal and noise. There needs to be selection, otherwise there's no way of making any sense of it."

Three years ago the library asked people to record the sounds of their environment at home, work or play. Their contributions created a map of Britain using more than 2,000 recordings.

Mr Prentice would love the library to collect mobile phone ringtones as a way of reflecting social trends. "Different subcultures appear based on forms of technology," he says.

The library receives a copy of every printed publication produced in the UK and Ireland. The collection includes well over 150m items, in most known languages. All this requires more than 625km – growing by 1km every month – of shelves.

The sound archive comprises 1.6m or so physical items – such as records or cassettes – plus a great many digital items "that never had a physical manifestation".

He says there is a "very robust back-up system for [the] digital library system. We have a complete copy of our entire digital library system here in London, we have another one in Yorkshire, we have another one in Edinburgh and we have another one in Wales, in Aberystwyth. It's meant to be disaster-proof."

One of Mr Prentice's favourite recordings is of Florence Nightingale from a July 30 1890 charity fundraiser for veterans of the Crimean war. The recording, which toured the country, was made by George Gouraud, who acted as an agent for Thomas Edison. "Florence Nightingale was just this Victorian black-and-white photograph or an oil painting and folklore, but we have a sound recording of her. When you hear that you can re-experience a moment in time." But he concedes that her voice reveals few surprises. "She sounds like a posh old lady."

### Will Prentice's top three archival recordings

- **'Bayati Shiraz Katar' by**

**Jabbar Karyagdy** "A phenomenal singer from Azerbaijan. This was made during an expedition to the Caucasus in 1909."

- **'The Edwardians: Family Life & Work Experience**

**before 1918'** "Several hundred interviews conducted around the UK in the early 1970s by

Mr Prentice is currently devising a 15-year plan for his 18-strong department of technicians and archivists. But they are working on borrowed time. First, this is because of public spending cuts. And second, because the technology on which he can listen to some of his recordings will soon become impossible to maintain as replacement parts are no longer manufactured or become obsolete. So he is trying to convert such recordings to digital archives quickly before the equipment he uses breaks down. "It's a ticking time bomb," he says.

His other concern is decaying recordings. He pulls out a dirty cream LP box. Inside is a disc caked in white dust; its grooves are

the University of Essex, with people who were old enough to have experienced working life at the end of the first world war. Each interview describes an era which has almost completely disappeared from living memory.”

• **‘Skank Bloc Bologna’ by Scritti Politti** “Their first release was this self-published 7in single, with a handmade sleeve detailing the costs and methods of production. Only 2,500 were made and as both artefact and recording it’s highly evocative of a particular time and ethos.”

*Listen to a further selection of unique sound recordings from the British Library’s collections*

buckled. It is a lacquer disc, used in recording studios before tape, on which is a live jazz session dated July 2 1950. “It’s probably the only copy of this recording in the world. It’s unplayable. And of course being jazz means that the performances themselves were unique, the solos and improvisation and so on. The surface is flaking off – we have to digitise these kind of [discs] while we still can.”

He is frequently asked by friends and members of the public: why not chuck out all those LPs and not bother recording music if it is all available on YouTube or Spotify? “They are right now, but they won’t necessarily be in the future and we don’t know how, in what way, they’ll be available in the future.”

In fact, Mr Prentice culled his own music collection five years ago. “I got rid of about a third of it because I’d realised that I hadn’t listened to it in a number of years. I [used to justify keeping it] by saying ‘I’m collecting the complete works of blah blah blah because then other people can hear it’. In reality no one ever did. . . So I got rid of a load of stuff and gave it to the sound archive. I gave it to the nation.”

Born to a farming family in Berwickshire, Mr Prentice studied ethnomusicology, the behaviour of people making music. It is little surprise he delights in the minutiae of personal details left in recordings.

He points to a cylinder recording device on the table. A precursor to the gramophone, it is the earliest commercial medium for recording and reproducing sound and dates from the late 19th century. It was taken on a research trip by Cambridge academics to the Torres Straits, off the northern tip of Queensland, Australia, in 1898. “They wanted to not only write down this weird language that they come across, they wanted to make recordings of it because it’s a far more accurate way of capturing stuff and re-experiencing it as a researcher.”

The night before their departure the researchers had a farewell party. “They’re having fun, probably they’ve had a few drinks at this stage and they go, ‘check this out’ . . . and they turn it on.” The recording reveals giggly academics and their spouses taking turns to speak into the device.

Mr Prentice wishes there were more records like this, revealing working people off-guard – going to the shops instead of during special occasions such as staged shows or speeches. He is particularly keen on office life. “Things that were ephemeral are often fascinating. If somebody gave us 60,000 hours of letters they dictated to their secretary we couldn’t devote the time to the whole lot but we would certainly want a handful of them.”