

**Unlocking
Our Sound
Heritage**

**LIBRARY
HERITAGE**



Cataloguing your sound collections

#SaveOurSounds



Cataloguing your sound collection

Like any other items held in an archive or in a library, sound recordings need to be described and structured in catalogue records in order to ensure their long-term discoverability and access. Every organisation and institution has its own ideas, standards and systems for capturing and storing cataloguing metadata. There is no single correct way to catalogue sound as it is dependent on a number of factors, some relating to the institution holding the material and some to the type of material. The biggest difference between them is not in what they capture and store but rather in how they structure and format it.

There is no fundamental difference in the cataloguing of sound and that of paper based resources, such as books and manuscripts. The same principle applies in that the cataloguing needs to take into account both the physical object and its contents. However, there are some differences that need to be addressed, some based on the medium itself and some based on the conventions established by specialist archives.

This document will outline some of the key considerations to take into account when cataloguing sound recordings.

Catalogue structure

The physical item and its contents may be described in a single database record, with the contents listed in a notes field, or by using a multilevel, hierarchical, system, or by using discrete entries for the recordings which are then linked to the item. The decision on how to catalogue it will depend partly on the setup and structure of the database used but may also be influenced by a number of other factors, including: resources available – both financial and personnel; the priorities and aims of the cataloguing institution; the information retrieval requirements of the institution and its users, and more. The use of a single catalogue record to cover both the physical item and the recording is likely to save time when cataloguing but may make access, retrieval and re-use more cumbersome. These decisions may vary from collection to collection, and even from item to item, but should be decided upon before cataloguing starts.

The physical item vs contents

The physical item, the 'carrier', can be a cassette, CD, wax cylinder, shellac disc, LP, minidisc, or any of a multitude of physical audio formats, which can contain one or more of any type of sound recordings: music, radio programmes, interviews, wildlife etc. Both the physical item and the recordings on it will need to be described. Where a recording only exists as a digital file, rather than being a copy of a physical item, you may wish to regard the file format as the carrier, and describe its technical characteristics separately from the audible recorded contents.

Physical description – capture information about the physical items.

Much of the information captured about the carrier will be the same as for any other archive/library objects but there are a few considerations:

Title	For published items this is normally straightforward as the title will generally be available on the carrier's sleeve, label and inlay. For unpublished items there may not be an obvious definitive title, however it may still be useful to create one, as an encapsulation of the item that will be displayed at a top level alongside other items. This is where you will have to make a decision on whether to use as a title something that identifies the carrier or the sound recording, or a combination of both. The use of a unique identifier, such as an accession number, on the carrier may render that decision moot.
Format	This describes the physical properties of the carrier and will not only help to identify it but, unlike paper based media, it will also indicate what type of equipment and settings are needed in order to replay it correctly: physical carrier type (LP, CD, cassette etc), replay speed, track configuration, stereo or mono, Dolby, etc.
Original/Copy	It is important to distinguish between an original recording and a later copy. For both preservation and cataloguing purposes, for unpublished recordings it will usually make sense to regard the earliest generation copy you possess as the "original," even if you know that an earlier generation version may exist outside of your collection.

The recording

The description of the recording and the information to capture will depend on a number of factors, including whether you are dealing with a published or unpublished recording, and the type/genre you are dealing with: music, oral history, wildlife, radio programmes, etc. Published recordings can be viewed as having an intrinsic relationship between the carrier and the recording, and as such may warrant just a single database record combining information about the physical item and the recording. A carrier with unpublished recordings will quite often contain a number of possibly unrelated recordings, which may sit uncomfortably together in one database record.

Published

A published recording is one that has been made commercially available in a limited or unlimited edition, usually of multiple copies, and there will usually be a defined publisher and a release date. Published recordings are often very straightforward to catalogue, assuming access to the original carrier is possible, as information is normally readily available on the sleeve, the box, inlay or label. The information may also be readily available in other catalogues, often online from sources such as www.discogs.com. This means that it is rarely necessary to listen to the recording in order to catalogue it. The key is to ensure to capture the 'official' information so that a researcher or other user can confidently identify the recording. Published recordings may have been issued and re-issued many times under different guises and variations, so it is important to be able distinguish between those versions in the catalogue. Key things to capture would include: Title, artist/contributor/composer, track listing, label (i.e. the 'publisher'), catalogue number, release date and country of release.

Unpublished recordings – Documentation, documentation, documentation!

Unpublished simply refers to any recording that has not been officially released or published, but in most cases there are more fundamental differences in that unpublished items are less likely to be structured in a standardised way, and they are mostly unedited recordings, never intended to be listened to widely. They can range from professionally made oral history interviews and wildlife recordings to compilations of pop songs recorded from the radio and anything in between.

Unlike published recordings, with unpublished recordings you are unlikely to be able to rely on an easily accessible catalogue, and so cataloguing a recording without some prior knowledge of what you are listening to can be extremely difficult and time-consuming. An interview may not state clearly who is talking, where it was recorded or when; a recording of folk songs may not list the songs recorded and even an expert may struggle to recognise all of them. The more information you can gather before cataloguing starts, the better. Often the physical carrier itself will contain information, often handwritten on the sleeve or box, on a label on the carrier or on an inlay, or there may be transcripts or other accompanying documentation. This is not always the case however, and such

information as does exist can't necessarily be relied upon. Some documentation may not yet be available to the cataloguing institution, so it is often worth going back to the original source of the material to enquire, as any additional documentation will greatly help the cataloguing process; not only will it speed it up but it will enhance its accuracy.

Unpublished recordings will often be titled according to the type of recording: oral history recordings tend to use the name of the person interviewed; wildlife recordings will favour the name of the species recorded; performances, such as live music and poetry recitals, will favour the performer, or song/poem, depending on level of cataloguing.

Unlike published or broadcast recordings, the important date to record is the date the original recording was made.

It is not always necessary to add a synopsis but certain types of recordings are greatly aided and enhanced by one. Oral history interviews will almost invariably benefit from one, and can be further enhanced with the use of timecodes either at set intervals or moments of particular interest.

Broadcast

A recording of a broadcast captured off-air, is in essence a form of published recording; it has a 'publisher' (broadcaster) and a 'release' date, i.e. transmission date, etc. but unlike published recordings it does not come with written information on a physical carrier. Although there are resources and catalogues available, such as the BBC's Genome database, and the BUFVC's TRILT and TV Tip, they are not comprehensive or detailed enough always to confidently identify the recording, making the cataloguing process more akin to that of unpublished recordings.

Standards

What to capture and how to capture it will ultimately depend on the cataloguing system and metadata standards adopted by the cataloguing institution. Most of the established standards for structure, contents and controlled vocabularies in use were originally developed for libraries, such as MARC21 and AACR2 (or its successor RDA), and don't necessarily fulfil all the needs of a sound archive. The library's traditional concept of responsibility, based around an author, for example, is quite different from that of a sound recording which often has both 'author' and performers. The focus on titles and responsibility may not always be a perfect fit for unpublished recordings containing oral history or wildlife, for instance.

To address this issue a number of specialist cataloguing rules relevant to the cataloguing of sound have been developed, such as those of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP), and the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA). Both of these are very detailed and require specialist knowledge but as they are based on established library standards they may be a good fit for many institutions.

Information to capture

Most cataloguing standards either list a minimum recommended set of elements to capture when cataloguing, or clarify which ones are mandatory and which are optional. Although referred to as 'minimum recommended' or 'mandatory' it is understood that not all the information will be available, at least not initially and possibly never. These elements and how to interpret and use them are generally understood in the context of the rules they are part of; IASA's set of three recommended levels are adapted from, and closely aligned with AACR2. A more accessible place to start might be with the best practice guide to film and sound archives in non-specialist repositories published by The Society of Archivists (now amalgamated into ARA). The section on cataloguing and indexing is only a brief overview of what to consider and does not go into any detail. It does however contain a minimum recommended set of 11 elements which can be understood outside the context of a particular cataloguing standard.

Further information

Dublin Core

<http://dublincore.org/>

MARC21

www.loc.gov/marc/

AACR2

www.aacr2.org/

RDA

www.rdatoolkit.org/

BBC Genome Project

<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>

BUFVC, Trilt and TVTip

<http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio>

ICA, ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description

<https://bit.ly/3nXCiTX>

The IASA cataloguing rules (IASA 1999) Ed. By Mary Miliano

<https://bit.ly/2LPm4iS>

Archives & Records Association, Film and Sound Archives in non-specialist repositories (2009), D M Lee

<https://bit.ly/35Z3iwm>

The FIAF Moving Image Cataloguing Manual (2016), Natasha Fairbairn, Maria Assunta Pimpinelli, Thelma Ross

<https://bit.ly/2LQ5X4z>