

2023

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Recommended Citation

Gonzalez, Veronica and Valdivia, Ximena (2023) "Representing Minority Groups and their Heritage across Access and Preservation of Unique Audio Recordings A Grant Overview," *Athenaeum: Scholarly Works of the FIU Libraries Faculty and Staff*. Vol. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/athenaeum/vol2/iss1/2>

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Representing Minority Groups and their Heritage across Access and Preservation of Unique Audio Recordings A Grant Overview

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Abstract

In 2021, the Florida International University (FIU) Libraries received the Recordings at Risks (R&R) grant from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). The funds allowed us to digitize, create metadata, and provide online access to hundreds of unique Caribbean and Latin American songs produced between 1900 and 1935 that are included in the Diaz Ayala Cuban and Latin American Popular Music Collection (DAC) Cassette Series. The digitized materials comprise more than 1,000 cassettes with approximately 1,200 songs, recorded originally in 78rpms by Columbia, Victor, and other historical record companies. The music represents a variety of genres and is a clear example of the life and conditions of minority groups in the region. The digitization of this collection has been essential to guarantee availability and long-term preservation. To provide more comprehensive access to these audio files, the FIU Libraries is contributing to the Discography of American Historical Recording (DAHR) at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), and the metadata will be added to the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA).

This article provides an overview of the most significant aspects of the R&R grant “Representing Minority Groups and Their Cultural Heritage through Access and Preservation of Unique Caribbean Musical Recordings, 1900-1935.” It discusses challenges and strategies for success, insights on material selection, copyright, and metadata initiatives.

Introduction

Librarians and archivists have an enormous responsibility to preserve unique materials relevant to research purposes. In the year 2020, a global pandemic occurred, and in a certain way, it immobilized the work that many of us were doing to ensure that unique materials could be preserved and made accessible. The libraries and archives closure represented a significant challenge because, without physical access to the collections and the uncertainty of how long the shutdown would last, it was impossible to plan, so we initiated a conversation on how to overcome these new circumstances.

The FIU Libraries houses one of the most relevant collections of Cuban and Latin American music, the Diaz Ayala Cuban and Latin American Popular Music Collection. The DAC was donated in 2001 by Cristobal Diaz Ayala, a Cuban lawyer, music collector, researcher, and writer. This collection includes approximately 150,000 items in different formats, including sound recordings, cassettes, videos, sheet music, photographs, and more. The Cassette Series is a sub-group of the DAC, which contains 4,500 cassettes with interviews, radio programs, and music recorded in the early 1900s. This article discusses the preservation and digital access to a selection of songs that testify to events that occurred during that time in the Caribbean and Latin American countries, with a particular emphasis on Cuba. For example, *De New York a la Habana* (1919) is a parody recorded by the Victor recording company (MPN 72788). The performers, Ramon Espigul and Lola Mayorga were recognized actors of the vernacular Cuban theater, an artistic expression in which music, dance, and humor were key elements for representations of political and social events that occurred at that time.

The vernacular Cuban theater was an extension of the *teatro bufo cubano*, developed at the end of the nineteenth century. Its importance is underscored by its role in reflecting and

preserving the Cuban cultural identity, history, and social complexity. This form of theater serves as a mirror of the society from which it originates and contributes to the enrichment and diversification of the global theatrical landscape. Through its unique expressions and storytelling, vernacular Cuban theater becomes a valuable vehicle for conveying the richness and complexities of Cuban life, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the nation's cultural heritage. The De New York a la Habana represents "the prototypical *negrito* character itself... proliferated into distinct types of Black characters who could be played against one another to heighten the comic effects" (Wirtz, 2013).

The songs recorded on magnetic tapes are at risk of deterioration. Analog cassette tapes are one of the most unstable formats in the collection, requiring immediate action to preserve their unique content. According to the Magnetic Media Audio (National Archives, n.d.), cassette tapes can be affected by serious issues such as sticky shed syndrome, vinegar syndrome, cassette cartridge damage, oxide loss, delamination, mold, and more.

Action Plan

We created an action plan to achieve our goals of preserving and creating access to the selection of songs. The most relevant objectives of this project were to reformat the analog cassettes and convert them into digital ones to guarantee current and future access to the content, create metadata to facilitate searches and discoverability and explore the alternatives available to create a sustainable project. We were conscious that this effort would require financial support to be completed. Therefore, the first step was to search for a grant to fund our project.

In the middle of the pandemic, it was necessary to list all the audio recordings included in the cassette collection. We focused our search on rare songs recorded between the years 1900 to 1935. Once the songs were indexed, we started our search for an institution interested in funding

our project. Fortunately, through its R&R Program, CLIR supports preserving rare and unique audio for academic research purposes. In April 2021, our project “Representing Minority Groups and Their Cultural Heritage through Access and Preservation of Unique Caribbean Musical Recordings (1900 to 1935)” was awarded \$49,986. The landing page for the project was created in 2021, and it is accessible through the FIU dPanther repository (FIU Libraries. n.d.). A Cassette Series Project Digital Tour (2022) is available in FIU Libtube media services. The program provides a maximum of \$50,000 in funding to reformat fragile audio materials at risk of obsolescence. Some requirements to apply for an R&R grant are content description, academic and public impact, risk assessment, rights, ethics and reuse, digital preservation plan, and sustainability (CLIR, n.d.). These requirements take an arduous amount of work to analyze and justify, especially when considering the rights and use of the music. Another time-consuming part of the project was identifying an experienced and trusted vendor to perform the digitization.

Exploring the available resources, we identified a professional company, Preserve South, located in Georgia, specializing in digitization and media migration services. Some of the organizations that previously entrusted their collections to this company are the University of Georgia, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the University of South Carolina, Turner Broadcasting, the University of Tennessee, Clemson University, the Archives of American, the Washington University in St. Louis, Coca-Cola, PBS, and Court TV. During the selection and evaluation of the company that would carry out the digitization process, we sought the support and guidance of Lyrasis, and their recommendation coincided with our selection. They explained that Preserve South has preservation experience in the library field, specifically with digitization.

For us, the outsourcing company needed to understand the difference between digitization with an emphasis on preservation and digitization for uploading materials onto the web. Fortunately, Preserve South has the capacity and the necessary equipment for digitization; they have audio engineers, librarians, and other audio specialists who understand the importance of preserving heritage in a sustainable format for the long term. Preserve South follows the standards and best practices that FIU requires in all digitization initiatives. In addition to expertise and professionalism, competitive costs were also considered in selecting the provider.

Rights and reuse were two additional aspects that represented a tremendous challenge in our application for this grant. Music and mechanical rights are two relevant factors to consider when streaming audio. There is a common misconception that all old music is in the public domain or that fair use can cover any use of audio materials in academic institutions. The FIU Libraries is committed to disseminating and opening the audio-recording content to a larger audience, including faculty, staff, students, and independent researchers. To ensure compliance with copyright laws, the FIU Libraries established a formal collaboration with a critical partner, the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB), to stream the audio on their site DAHR (University of California, 2008-2022). The USCBA and the Library of Congress collaborate to provide access to acoustic sound recordings issued on record labels currently owned by Sony Music Entertainment.

Material selection

One of the priorities at the DAC is to rescue unique and rare songs that are part of the Cassette Series. As previously mentioned, a selection of 1,000 cassettes containing 1,250 songs, originally released at 78 rpm by Columbia, Victor, and other vintage record labels, were chosen for digitization. Analog magnetic tapes are more susceptible than other formats in the collection

to wear and tear from environmental factors and human manipulation. Most of the songs included in the cassette series are rare items that cannot be easily replaced. Some of the original recordings may be in private hands, which does not guarantee the accessibility and preservation of the content; only a few of these recordings can be found in the Biblioteca Digital Hispánica (Biblioteca Nacional de España, n.d.).

Our primary concern is to protect and preserve old music recorded in this format because it is a testimony to historical and social events. Moreover, the music transferred to cassettes embodies a variety of genres such as danzón, plena, rumba, and more, representing minority groups in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and more. The lyrics and compositions illustrate the traditions and collective identity of many minority cultures. Other factors considered in the selection were the playback and handling of the analog tapes because both cause irreversible damage. The loss of this content is the permanent destruction of a unique aspect of Latin American and Caribbean history. Additionally, maintaining the equipment to play the cassettes is a constant concern for the archive. The impact on scholarship was another essential factor due to the uniqueness of the information and the restrictions on the availability of the content. A large community of scholars draws upon these recordings as primary research materials by using popular songs to analyze a country's culture, economy, and history.

Team coordination: External and internal collaboration

Initially, we applied for the grant, thinking that our core group of four people would be the only human resources required. However, when we received the grant, it became apparent that the project could only be completed with internal and external collaborators. We learned that it is vital to anticipate and identify the active participation of individuals and organizations required for any project.

Internally, the DAC and the Cataloging Department at FIU worked together to obtain economic resources and develop the initiative. The staff included a cataloging librarian and a metadata assistant. The audio also required editing and uploading actions, tasks performed by the Diaz Ayala Collection Librarian and a student assistant. The Digital Collection Center at FIU coordinated the dissemination to make our content available on the Digital Public Library of America. Furthermore, the FIU Office of Research and Economic Development (ORED) performed logistic and administrative work. External collaborators included the funder (CLIR), the vendor (Preserve South), and our partner (UCSB). One of the biggest challenges was coordinating the project's moving parts with the collaborators. Beyond creating metadata and audio files, the larger scope of the work was project management, something we should have considered when beginning the project since all the administrative activities required additional time that was not included in our original timeline, leading to an overall extension of the project's deadlines. With the support of partners, we learned skills outside traditional librarian and archivist duties that will be invaluable for future initiatives, including gaining proficiency in operating vintage audio equipment.

Metadata

Riley (2004, 1) defines metadata as “structured information that describes, explains, locates, and otherwise makes it easier to retrieve and use an information resource.” It aims to help users find, connect with, and evaluate the material to meet their research needs. One of the main goals of our project was to create and provide access to 1,000 metadata records for songs created and recorded from 1900 to 1935. The intent was to provide accurate and comprehensive descriptions, adopt normalized procedures and practices in metadata creation and better reflect the community represented in the collection.

Metadata Background

When we started the project, we could not find many digital cassette tape collection examples to learn how other academic institutions described cassettes or similar formats. We had previous experience creating or enhancing metadata for audio file collections at FIU. However, we were looking for ways to improve searchability and maintain consistency in the description while providing more robust metadata.

One of the first conversations related to metadata creation was about the required elements to include in the description. Understanding that descriptive metadata may be the only access point for audio files due to the material type, we determined the minimum viable and optimal desirable content. To achieve consistency in the description, we defined the type of information to include and the order of the entries for each element. We also determined specific notes to add to each record, mainly to give credit to funding institutions and partners.

Metadata tools

After the initial discussion about required metadata elements, we created a Metadata Preparation Guide. This guide includes not only required metadata elements but also provides access instructions for each entry, content formatting, links to online resources for additional information, and local authority control lists for names and music genres.

The donor, Cristobal Diaz Ayala, prepared paper-based indexes of the cassette tape collection. These indexes contained an inclusive inventory of all the tapes organized chronologically by accession number. Using the donor's inventory notebooks, a metadata specialist transcribed the data to an Excel spreadsheet with pre-defined and required metadata fields. The specialist spent most of her time researching and gathering relevant information to enhance descriptions and achieve the required consistency and accuracy. This research generated

a local name authority list mainly focused on creators and contributors not in established controlled vocabularies. Future digitization projects may include crowdsourcing from the community to expand the lists of names. In order to better represent the content of the collection and to reach a wider audience, some data in Spanish is included.

To better use the system, the cassette number assigned by the donor was added as a Series Title and is searchable, providing access to all songs available on each cassette. Access to all of the titles from one cassette in a search is helpful because this is the only place (besides the paper-based indexes) where the detailed content of each cassette can be found. The original purpose of the cassettes was for Puerto Rican radio programs that Cristobal Diaz Ayala hosted. These programs covered a broad range of topics from individual to group performers and musicians, as well as genres, instruments, historical anniversaries, and more. At first glance, there appears to be no logic in the content, but music experts will find a remarkable consistency across the material. The series is held together by provenance, but the most significant aspect that keeps it consistent is its thematic focus. Examples of the themes are, for instance, [Cassette 0286](#), which includes all songs performed by the Cuban singer Rita Montaner; [Cassette 3870](#), which contains traditional Cuban music; and [Cassette 0546](#), which includes songs performed by Cuban sextet bands.

Descriptive metadata records have been entered in the FIU dPanther Digital Repository (2022). dPanther is based on SobekCM Digital Content Management System, an open-source software initially developed at the University of Florida. The benefits of using SobekCM include full-text searching, browsing with multiple browse options, serving text, image, audio, and video files within the same collection, and its support of multiple file types. Another benefit is that it

integrates metadata records into the FIU Libraries library system Ex Libris Alma/Primo VE. Producing MARC records from MODS gives wider access to the collection.

Metadata will be shared through DPLA, the free online library that provides access to a rich and unique collection of over 44 million books, photographs, and audiovisual materials from libraries, archives, and museums nationwide. In the State of Florida, institutions like Florida State University, FIU, and the University of Miami are part of the DPLA Sunshine State Digital Network. In our role, we are responsible for aggregating digital content metadata.

Since the digitized materials consist of home-recorded cassettes, we designed a cassette image as the thumbnail for each metadata record. Once DAHR uploads the audio files, FIU will link their records to the dPanther repository, allowing us to provide access to the full version of the songs. However, until then, users can listen to a thirty-second demo.

Subject and Authority control

Some terminology from the time of the recordings is outdated, so we used the Library of Congress Subject Headings as the established controlled vocabulary to fill the subject field. To achieve and improve interoperability, we added the source code “lsch” every time a value is integrated. Another controlled vocabulary used is the LC Thesaurus for Graphic Materials (tgm), mainly to describe the genre of the material.

At FIU, there is a focus on implementing more inclusive metadata. To achieve this, we added some subjects in Spanish. Most of the researchers using this collection read Spanish or understand the language well. Having terms in Spanish will be helpful for the retrieval of the wanted material. For consistency, we used the controlled vocabulary from the Biblioteca Nacional de España, which is free and open to the public. We are only adding genres for the type of music and material.

Some of the content from the period may be considered culturally sensitive today. However, the songs represent a reality from a completely different era, which is useful when studying social change. A team of FIU librarians is working on harmful language statements to be placed in the repository to acknowledge and inform the existence of this content. Users may find examples of parodies stereotyping race in songs like La Lucumi (Novoa, 1915), where a Black woman who speaks in Bozal – “a dialect of Spanish spoken by African slaves brought to Cuba” (Lapidus, 2015, 18) - is degraded by the white man she interacts with, due to her ethnicity. In addition, the artist that plays the role of the Black woman exaggerates the pronunciation of the Bozal dialect as a mockery of the minority group she represents. La Lucumi is an example of a typical blackface comedy of the Teatro Bufo, which according to Lane (1998, 38), “was perfectly acceptable as long as “it remained clear that... black people... stayed in their place.” The song Chino Perico illustrates another case of racial impersonation, where the dialogue is delivered with a fake Chinese pronunciation and offers a prejudiced and offensive presentation.

La Lucumi (song-extract)

Bueno dia

Buenos dias viejita, que quiere? Una limosna?

No vien ca pa piri limosna, io vega pia pregunta Lui Matamoro vive aqui?

Si viejita, Luis Matamoros soy yo. Que se te ofrece?

Io venga po que nieta mia eta casa llora. Dice que tu no qui vivi ma con ella

De que me hablas viejita

De nieta mia, que tu no quie vivi ma con ella. No quie' casa con elle

Ja, ja, ja pero tu estas loca hija, tu crees que yo me voy a casar con tu nieta

Po' que no?... mi nieta e blanco como tu mimo

Si, la nieta si, pero la abuela no

Chino Perico (song-extract)

Oye, Chino Manila, desrengao que estas haciendo ahi en la esquina donde tengo yo a la mulata, hombre!

Ome, yo ta pala' qui poque eta epelando une paisano que me tlae dinele pa controlao

Un paisan, desprestigiao. Tu te crees que yo no te vi tirandole el encandembo a la mulata?

No na ginga, uste clee que Chino son simbelguneza, no?

Since the dPanther Repository is character-based, any slight change or extra space creates a separate access point for the value, which can compromise the search experience. Metadata records are being checked and revised to ensure that those with the same intellectual content are linked. Accents and any other special symbols that create issues in the search process are being removed. The system capabilities and restrictions regarding the name and subject control have been addressed by adding “internal notes” or clarification comments, which improve search results for natural language searching; the terminology is not included as a tracing reference in the authority file. The notes are not displayed but are searchable.

Planning for the Future

Through this project of enhancing metadata for audiocassettes and improving the user experience, we learned that for future projects, we need to consider additional steps to ensure access and inclusion. For example, users would benefit from song lyrics as a text file in each metadata record to complement the audio files. Lyrics are instrumental when the audio recording

is not accessible or when users are not familiar with the song's language or cultural context. Moreover, Cope et al. (2019, 7) note that users can analyze variations in the compositions to evaluate the relevance of the content for their research and study of interrelationships among songs. In this analysis, users can also find connections with other areas, such as art, history, politics, and social sciences.

Adding keywords to reflect the topical subjects of each song will improve searchability and discovery, although it must be done with care. Assigning subject headings and keywords is time consuming because it requires an interpretation of lyrics that may be poetically or culturally unknown to the metadata specialist. Studies demonstrate that users want to know what the songs are about and that subject headings provide a valuable way to organize and access audio collections (Choi et al. 2015, 183). However, a collection of this magnitude may need an automated system to identify the topics.

We will seek out specific ways to integrate the collection into coursework, library instruction, and events to ensure the materials are more widely known and used among the community we serve. Although the content is digitally available, more is needed to guarantee wider use and increase visibility. It is imperative to better use the repository and understand what the system can do at the institutional level, such as providing some context to digital collections beyond adding links to related sources and the geographic information system data.

The DAC is well known for hosting community initiatives. One of them is Viernes de Musicalia, an event sponsored in partnership with the FIU Cuban Research Institute (CRI) and CasaCuba. Viernes de Musicalia features speakers, performers, and researchers on Latin American and Caribbean music-related topics. Attendees include students, professors, and music enthusiasts. Viernes de Musicalia promotes, disseminates, and instructs the audience on how to

access and navigate the audio resources available.

We will explore ways to strengthen and better define internal and external collaborators and partners. Horton (2021, 42) points out that, in many cases, a lack of resources force collaboration. We want to partner with our peer institutions for future grant applications to pool our resources together. Our project team had to learn to be flexible, provide training at different levels, delegate, trust each other, rely on personal relationships, and effectively communicate to stay focused on the project goals.

Unanticipated administrative and technical issues can occur in any project, but the positive outcomes are empowering. Clear and common goals, documentation, and leadership are key components to successfully managing projects. With this grant, we learned along the way and will build on this for future opportunities. There is so much potential in this collection, and we are confident that this project will positively impact the community.

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