America on Record

Second Edition

With Thomas Edison’s invention of the phonograph, the beautiful music that was the preserve of the wealthy became a mass-produced consumer good – a sound recording – cheap enough to be available to all. In 1877 Edison dreamed that one day there would be a talking machine in every home, but even his legendary vision could not have foreseen the way that recorded sound would pervade modern life.

America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound provides a history of sound recording from the first thin sheet of tinfoil that was manipulated into retaining sound to the home recordings of rappers in the 1980s and the high-tech studios of the 1990s. This book examines the important technical developments of acoustic, electric, and digital sound reproduction while outlining the cultural impact of recorded music and movies. This second edition brings the story up to date, describing the digital revolution of sound recording with the rise of computers, Napster, DVDs, MP3, and iPods.

Andre Millard is Director of American Studies and Professor of History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. He is the author of Edison and the Business of Innovation and a contributor to National Public Radio’s Lost and Found Sound.
America on Record
A history of recorded sound

Second Edition

ANDRE MILLARD
University of Alabama at Birmingham
For my mother, Stella Mary Millard, 1923–2004
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Preface to the second edition

In the ten years since the publication of this book there have been momentous changes in the technology of recorded sound. Changes so rapid and so far reaching that some commentators have already anticipated the end of hard media like CDs and the major record companies that produce them. This edition seeks to bring the reader up to date with the new technology, new businesses, and new status of sound recordings in the digital age. In the Preface to the first edition I hoped that technological change would not make some of the machines I described obsolete before the book reached its readers. I do so again, confident that the Internet, MP3, and personal computers will not go the way of DCC or DAT. In this edition I have tried to look a bit farther into the future. These predictions are based on the beliefs that copying of digital content will not be eliminated by legal or technological means, that proprietary interests will bow to the imperative of compatibility, and that large corporations will continue to adapt to technological change. If these conditions hold I expect that this edition will last at least ten more years.

I want to thank Steve Klein and Erik Lizee for reading the manuscript and making useful suggestions and UAB graduate students Thomas Scales and Nilanjana Majumdar for helping in the production of the text.
Preface to the first edition

America on Record is an attempt to describe the technological development and cultural impact of sound recording from its inception to the early 1990s – “from Edison’s phonograph to gangsta rap,” as one reviewer put it. As space is limited, I have not provided a full account of the technology or its cultural effects – I leave this to the experts – but instead a concise narrative which covers the significant events and explains the relationship of these two important forces. This is an interdisciplinary book intended for students in History and American Studies, and their pressing schedules have been uppermost in my mind during the preparation of the manuscript.

The history was written during a time of rapid technological advance, and I have no doubt that more innovations in digital sound recording will have been made before the book appears in print. I ask the reader’s indulgence for sections that may appear outdated and hope that the machines described in the closing chapters have not become obsolete in the short time from manuscript to published book.

Researching and writing this book was truly a pleasure. I owe a great debt to Raymond Wyman, Professor Emeritus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who not only read the manuscript several times but also gave me the benefit of his years of experience with audio visual technology. Peter Copeland, recording engineer and Conservation Manager of the British Library National Sound Archive in London, also went through the manuscript and helped me understand much of the technology. My friend Ed Pershey of the Tsongas Industrial History Center was full of his usual insights and guided me along the path to a readable book.

Several important archives were made available to me. I want to thank the staff of the Edison National Historic Site, especially Doug Tarr and Jerry Fabris; Sam Brylawski of the Recorded Sound Reference Center at the Library of Congress; Dan Morgenstern of the
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Institute of Jazz Studies, Newark; Emmett Chisum of the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, Laramie; Dick Cooper of the Alabama Music Hall of Fame; and Tina McCarthy of the Sony/CBS music archives, New York. Ruth Edge and her staff at the EMI archives in Hayes near London were most helpful, and I still have fond memories of the EMI canteen. Chris Moult of the Listening Service of the British Library patiently provided me with hours of taped oral histories. Sheldon Hochheiser of the AT&T archives in New Jersey not only guided me through that excellent collection but also reviewed the sections on the transition to sound in motion pictures and gave me some useful advice.

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Kevin Gustin did the computer work on the composite picture of the record catalogues (Figure 4.4), and Richard Anderson drew the diagrams. I thank them both for their fine work.

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