"And History's Lamps Blow Out": Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Filk

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Abstract: The processes by which sound records are preserved have become a hot topic in Library and Information Science (LIS) circles in recent years, as both technological shifts and cultural concern for preservation have drawn attention to how little of the nation's sound and music files remain for future use and access. While much of the literature has focused on higher level concerns such as advocating for sound preservation and what practices should be applied, less has been written regarding the practical skillsets LIS professionals will need in creating and curating such collections. To begin looking at this question, this paper explores the subculture of science-fiction-and-fantasy-related folk music known as "filk," and the challenges which that community has faced in preserving its music.

This paper is divided into four parts. Part I offers a brief review of the current state of sound preservation in the United States, along with the challenges being faced by sound preservationists and archivists, followed by an overview of filk and its subculture in Part II. Part III then discusses several attempts at such preservation by the community itself, and offers comparisons with similar community attempts at creating "amateur archives." Finally, Part IV concludes by revisiting Part I and discussing what the attempts at preserving filk reveal about the skills that LIS professionals will need in attempting future sound preservations.

Keywords: Library and Information Science; Archives; Sound Preservation, filk

The Challenges of Sound Preservation

According to Nelson-Strauss, Gevinson, and Brylawski (2012), there are some 46 million sound recordings in the libraries, archives, and museums of the United States—millions more also being held by record companies, artists, broadcasters, and collectors (p. 1). Of these recordings, untold millions are in dire need of conservation before they degrade past the point of preservation (within the next twenty years), provided that they can even be recovered now since there is currently no efficient way for researchers to identify where files needing preservation are located (pp. 2-3). Many files have already been lost: for example, the Library of Congress's radio archives, considered the largest in the world, have fewer than fifty recordings for the first ten years of commercial radio broadcasts in the United States (Bamberger and Brylawski, 2010).

Little wonder, then, that preservationists have been concerned about how to keep future files from degrading. The process is not as simple as replaying and rerecording the sounds, however. First, there is the matter of the originating formats. As noted by Monkman (2016), sound records include cylinders made of brass, wax, or plastic; vinyl and shellac records; magnetic wire and cassettes; CDs and DVDs; and other purely digital formats, all of which have different longevities and require different conditions for preservation, including air quality, light exposure, and physical placement (pp. 1-7). Preservationists can very easily lack the knowledge necessary to treat such a wide range of formats.

This mix of sound lifespans and materials also raises additional practical questions. For example, the variability of the aforementioned factors means that sound preservationists aren't always able to identify when it is too late to begin preservation efforts, or what medium/resulting platform the

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platform the sound should be preserved in due to media formats aging or being supplanted by new ones while preservation efforts are underway. Many of the files are protected under copyright, raising legal questions about how to respect owner and artist rights in curating personal collections of sound. There are even questions regarding how the general public can be convinced of the need for preservation and how funds can be raised for the effort, given that many will never listen to some of these audio files and that, broadly-speaking, audio files are often viewed as less important compared to more easily accessible files like books. (Nelson-Strauss, 2012).

There are also more theoretical concerns at play. Preservationists strive to keep their originating documents as authentic as possible, but given the reality of having to copy the sound files, they may be forced to create newer conceptions of authenticity, such as authenticity in the interaction between the listener and the file itself (Monkman, 2016, pp. 9-11). There is also the matter of how files should be selected for preservation and what criteria should be used in their selection, as there is simply no feasible way to preserve every recording left in existence. To quote Bamberger (2010):

> Many considerations will come to bear on those decisions. Making them wisely will require the input of people with a certain measure of cultural literacy and a knowledge of history—people who understand that it is not enough to preserve sound recordings already judged to be historically and culturally significant. Significance is too often recognized and conferred only after the passage of years. We do not have the luxury of waiting until the significance of a sound recording is apparent before its preservation begins. By then, it may be too late. (p. 8)

Thus, there is both a great need for sound preservation, as well as a litany of challenges involved in doing so, from the technological to the cultural. How is a preservationist meant to navigate such a complex issue? While some of these methodologies can be easily taught (e.g. providing would-be pres-

ervationists with a booklet listing types of recording formats and preservation techniques to use on them), others require an examination or case study into cultural values regarding the ownership of sound and what makes something culturally significant. These kinds of examinations can help preservationists develop fluency and insight into how to address and contemplate such questions prior to beginning the work of preservation itself. The following examination of the filk community and attempts at archiving filk music was done as a case study to see what kinds of skills future archivists will need to have in working and curating similar collections.

What is Filk?

Filk is remarkably difficult to define as a musical genre. In fact, according to Tatum (2009), the main activity that participants in the culture—known as "filkers"—do, besides composing and singing is arguing about attempts at definition (para. 5.1). Nevertheless, the most all-encompassing definition is likely that offered by filker Gary McGath, which is that filk is "a musical movement among fans of science fiction and fantasy fandom and closely related activities, emphasizing content which is related to the genre or its fans, and promoting broad participation" (para. 5.4).

This topical breadth has manifested in the genre's very eclectic range of musical characters, motifs, and inspirations, which encompass major works of film and literature. Songs tend to have lyrics written from the perspective of the fictional characters themselves, often in order to build or comment upon the existing text by pulling marginalized characters or subplots up to the surface (Jenkins, 2012, p. 252). Examples include songs that are based on the *Velveteen Rabbit, Bridge to Terabithia,* NASA's Project Apollo, and old English and Scottish folk ballads from the Appalachians mentioning supernatural beings (Crane, 1999, Launius, 2004, p. 2, Boros, 2010, p. 2).

There is more agreement amongst community members regarding filk's dissemination, as it is similar to folk music practices. This includes features such and

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as oral circulation over fixed written texts, variations in performance, and communal selection of which songs are preserved, though it is not considered to be identical with folk music (Jenkins, pp. 268-270).

Historical evolution and community practices

Filk first began to emerge at fan conventions in the 1940s, when science fiction song sheets were prepared for the 1940 Worldcon (World Science Fiction Convention) in London and the 1943 Michicon (Gold, 1997, p. 2). However, these works were not referred to as filk, as the term hadn't been coined yet.

The term itself first came into existence in the mid-1950s when a fan named Lee Jacobs submitted an essay to the Spectator Amateur Press Society titled, "The Influence of Science Fiction on Modern American Filk Music" (Anderson, 1955, p. 3; Gold, 1997, pp. 1-2; Launius, 2004, p. 2,). While the piece was ultimately rejected by SAPS editor Wrai Ballard—who considered its material to be so "thoroughly filthy" that its publication would risk violating laws against mailing pornography—Jacobs's misspelling of the word "Folk" in the title interested him, prompting Ballard to tell his friends about the piece (Gold, pp. 1-2). Two of these friends, Karen and Poul Anderson, later used the term to describe a short song of Poul's titled "Barbarous Allen," which Karen had published in 1955 in her magazine the *Die Zeitschrift für Vollständigen Unsinn* (*the Magazine for Complete Nonsense,* aka "the Zed"), and almost immediately science fiction fans began to compose songs to fit the newly named genre because it was felt that "rather than waste a phrase like 'filk song,' something must be created to which the name could be applied" (Anderson, 1955, p. 3; Launius, 2004, p. 2; McGath, 2015, p. 22).

Filkers perform their pieces at gatherings known as "Filksings," which generally occur at conventions in small rooms with the chairs arranged in a circle (Tatum, para. 2.2). There are at least nine regular filk conventions held each year worldwide (Interfilk), but when at broader fan conventions, the filksings tend to be scheduled late at night to avoid conflicts with other activities taking place over the course of the convention weekend (Jenkins 2012, pp. 254;274; McGath 2015, p. 10). Participants take turns at performing, following two broad styles: a basic "bardic" style in which the rotation goes around the circle in order, and a "chaotic" style in which performers take turns at random, with the exact degree of randomness somewhat moderated through several variations in order to ensure some degree of topical connection between songs (Gold, 2004). Performance is not required, as identified by the community adage, "they also filk, who only sit and listen" (Childs-Helton, 2016, p. 69).

According to Childs-Helton (2016), when at its best, the resulting space and activity of the filksing is viewed by the community as a "special locus in space and time, created for and by the community, and is a safe, encouraging place for individual and group play, support and, most of all, co-creation" (p. 74). This communal aspect is vital: "once you're known as part of [the filk community], you're welcome everywhere" (McGath, p. 14). While there are some obvious reasons as to why a communal activity like group singing may create such a strong bond, it is worth noting that it is partially because, in singing collaboratively, the filkers are engaging in a ritualized form of communication that emphasizes "not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs," thereby reaffirming and recreating their community with each singing (Launius, p. 9).

Given this strong emphasis on performance and emotional engagement, it should not be surprising that the filk community heavily values creativity, passionate enjoyment of making music, and direct, face-to-face engagement between individuals, having held onto these values across the Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennial, and Homeland generations (Childs-Helton, 2003, p. 1; Childs-Helton, 2016, p. 90).

Demographics of filkers.

Finally, it is worth noting the demographics of the community. Detailed information is limited because the first in-depth examination of the filk commu-

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nity occurred in 1992, and in the almost 25 years since, there have only been a handful of notable publications discussing it, precious few of which are formal academic studies (Childs-Helton, 2016, p. 64). However, there is still some information available. There are approximately 1,200 dedicated filkers worldwide (p. 74). Given the wide range of interests it attracts, filkers are known to hail from a wide cross-section of society. While "there is a strong tendency towards light skin," there is roughly equal male-female participation in the community, and religious pluralism is common (McGath, p. 14). The filk community cuts across the generational age gap, with members born in the 1920's-1940's to those born between 1981 and 1996. There is some concern that the lack of filk available at larger conventions, the learning curve involved in understanding all of the internal community references and aesthetic musical conventions, and the overall lack of awareness of filk more broadly, have caused Millennials to participate less and thus prompted concerns over aging (Childs-Helton, pp. 86-87).

Amateur Archives and Attempts at Archiving Filk

Given the above, it is not difficult to see why filkers (and broader audiences) would want their music preserved. Filk constitutes an audio record and musical tradition that stretches over seventy years, with individual filk songs depicting interpretations of and reactions to major works of popular culture. Because filk is mostly ignored by those outside of the community, said communities are in danger of losing members as time goes on due to access barriers, including the absence of a formal filk archive. There are, however, amateur ones.

Amateur archives. According to Baker, amateur archives are rooted in the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos of the folk, country, punk, and post-punk movements, and are established by enthusiasts of a particular communal culture that self-manages the archival facility (Baker, 2015, p. 171). In the case of music, amateur archives tend to be trans-local—as fans are geographically dispersed but constitute "af-

fective" communities—and have collections that also contain artifacts surrounding the artists such as publicity materials, merchandise, clothing, instruments, and personal items, as well as the records of their music (Baker, 2015, pp. 171-173; 182). Such archives tend to formally emphasize collecting, preserving, and archiving materials through spreading information about the genre, cataloging, and celebrating the music through education and promotion; while not formally stated, many aim to "keep memories alive" so that "popular music's recent past is appropriately remembered" (p. 180).

This emotional engagement is crucial to the formation of an amateur archive. The archivists involved are often volunteers who did not initially interact with the musical tradition being preserved as archivists but as fans (Duffet & Löbert, 2015, p. 160). Such a perspective is important because fans are generally suspicious of more official kinds of archives and museums, organizations that fans feel tend to ignore major works in their tradition because of formal gatekeepers not finding the pieces culturally significant or commercially viable enough to preserve. This leads to enthusiasts acting as archivists to quickly preserve works of popular culture before they vanish, and consequently to actively represent enthusiast histories, stories, and knowledge (Collins, 2015, pp. 128-130).

Examples of such amateur musical archives include one for radio broadcasts of "barn dance" country music, and another of turntablist hip-hop music within the United States, both of which not only offer researchers valuable insight into these musical traditions at pivotal times in their formation, but also enable individuals to engage with broader views of culture by challenging dominant nostalgic reinterpretations of culture (Katz, 2015, pp. 40-45). In particular, Katz notes that without these archives, modern audiences may not realize or learn how deeply commercial (and at times racist) broadcast dialogue was woven into radio music during the Great Depression, or how hip-hop DJs actually created their music on turntables because evidence of these practices is often absent from other musical records (Katz, 2015, pp. 43-44).

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Attempts at archiving filk. The aforementioned descriptions and motivations also apply to the archives of the filk community. Filk itself is not considered to be commercially viable due to its eclectic range of topics, musical conventions, and its grassroots communal approach to making music (Childs-Helton, 2016, p. 74; , Jenkins, 2012, p. 276; McGath, 2012, p. 101). Filkers are aware of this, as their continued emphasis on do-it-yourself culture and on the grassroots origin of their community demonstrates that they find these very noncommercial aspects of filk to be key in how filkers claim ownership in and relate to their music.

 These attitudes, coupled with the awareness of the difficulty of finding filk, have understandably led filkers to establish archives for the purpose of ensuring the proliferation and enjoyment of their work. Filker Gary McGath has even created an open-sourced metadata schema project solely to help filkers establish such archives after finding that existing models such as Dublin Core, METS, MODS, and EAD don't fit filk archival practices well because of being either too metadata-heavy or too incomplete for easy data transfer; admittedly, his model doesn't appear to have been widely adopted (McGath, 2006). Still, despite or perhaps because of the lack of uniform archival practices, multiple amateur archives have been created. These archives follow two general models.

The first model—the oldest and also the most common way that filk has been preserved—is through the creation and sharing of songbooks, which serve as portable archives for the genre. The earliest known filk songbook in existence was likely Laurence Sandfeld's 1957 paper booklet, *Songs from Space,* which was presented at Worldcon in 1957 (McGath, 2015, p. 22). However, songbooks have evolved alongside technology, and over the course of the next 60 years they have not only been written down on paper, but also recorded as phonographs, wire records, reel-to-reel tape records, and cassette tapes, as well as printed as mimeo stencils and microfiche (Gold, 1997; McGath, 2015, p. 31). Today filkers tend to offer songbooks to members and attendees of their filksings at conventions, sometimes along with accompanying CDs, with

the understanding that the performers retain all original rights and that the presence of any of their songs in the book indicates the artist's agreement to royalty-free usage (Conflikt, 2019; "Interfilk," 2002, pp. 4-6).

Songbooks may contain a variety of information. Aside from the expected lyrics for a particular song, songbooks may also include sheet music, guitar tabs, linear notes about the artists' thoughts, and even accompanying artwork ("Interfilk," 2002). This is partly because songbooks are generally meant solely for filker use, and therefore there is some expectation that users will want to learn to play the songs as well.

Outside of this physical model, filkers also have an established practice of using personal websites and social media as digital archives. According to McGath (2015), the oldest of these filk websites and archives are Steve Savitzky's Cyberspace Starport and Scott Dorsey's archive for Leslie Fish (p. 60). Sadly, both of these have since fallen out of date, with Starport's last update in February of 1995 and Dorsey's in April 1997. Nevertheless, filkers have continued to adapt to the shifting digital landscape, with filk community spaces and recordings present on social media and Web 2.0 spaces such as Facebook, YouTube, and LiveJournal (Childs-Helton, 2016, p. 72). For example, musician and filker Bills Mills maintains both a personal website[1] and Facebook page,[2] with his website including a small archive of filk music under the heading "Fannish Music Pages"[3] (Mills, 2015). Additionally, there are also many group music communities that center around filk on social media platforms. These include, but are not limited to, a Discord channel called #filkhaven; a Tumblr page called filkyeahfilk[4] two different Filking groups on Facebook, F is for Filker[5] and Filker,[6] as well as a group for the Filk Hall of Fame;[7] and Interfilk, an in-Filk charity that sends filkers who are known in only one region to other regions.[8] Despite this digital presence, it still remains true that for many filkers, filk's heart "is real-life gathering of people" (McGath, p. 10).

The existence of songbooks and digital archives suggest that the filk community has responded well and actively to the challenge of retaining their own work

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making it better known to others. Nevertheless, this brief review of major resources and known archives in the community reveals several major limitations that professional archivists can readily identify. First, despite the existence of a metadata scheme such as that of McGath (2006), no single process of recording metadata has gone "community-wide," likely resulting in files being lost while creating major issues with crediting original artists and artists accessing the files themselves. Second, the emphasis on grassroots/individual artist or organization websites means there is precious little uniformity with how the files are presented or linked to each other, furthering the loss of access as archives quickly became outdated, inaccessible, or are presented idiosyncratically. Finally, the emphasis in both the physical and digital archives on future performance—that is, on having performances available for filkers to view and use to improve their own future songs—has meant that there has been little attention paid to preservation as much as to proliferation and enjoyment of the records. This results in an extreme range of variation in the files as filkers perform and reinterpret each other's songs without always keeping track of a piece's overall evolution, the information regarding particular variations, or preserving older variations of a particular song.

This has led to a scenario that could be considered a research and archival nightmare. Hypothetically, it is possible that videos of a given filk performance could exist as part of one filker's YouTube account, an audio recording on another's Facebook page, and as lyrics in a digitized copy of a songbook belong to a third that has been made available on a personal website. There is no established way for any of these filkers to know of, share, link, or comment on each other's resources to make one strong, easily accessible archival file, since they would first have to be able to find each other to have such linkage without having already been made aware of each other at least once before.

Even if these three filkers—one with a video record, one with a sound record, and one with a digitized written record, all of the same song— find each other, there will likely be difficulties in deciding whose version should be preserved. First, the different file formats raise a host of question as to what form the music should ultimately preserved in. The songbook format has the least audio and performance information available in it, but it is likely the most easily preserved. The audio and video records have more performance information in them, but face all the difficulties of technological decay and access described above in Part I. Second, the variability in files also means that there are likely severe questions regarding other common means of deciding what copy should be preserved. This includes questions of authenticity (is this the original piece? What counts as the original piece in an oral tradition?); ownership (who created this file? Who first performed this? Do they know a file was created of that performance?); and provenance (where did this work even come from? Are there communities who would claim ownership over this besides the filk community?). Individual filkers themselves might be the only ones who know where their copies came from in the filk community, which in turn could prompt an archival hunt across multiple digital platforms and physical resources to find the initial singer, whose own record of the song could be vastly different.

All of this means that if an archival file could be created, it is likely to be either one with a high degree of inauthenticity embedded into it, or a complex, multi-faceted file that would be attempting to convince researchers and users that its authenticity lies in the overall shape, variation, and evolution of the various performances it contains, all based on what individual filkers know or are able to find out about the song being preserved. Therefore while filker attempts at DIY archives may have achieved their goals of proliferating filk music by spreading it in multiple formats around the community, these attempts have arguably failed to ensure goals of education, celebration, or enjoyment of the filk tradition because the wide, scatter-shot

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dissemination of their work online and in portable songbooks has created a record that has limited accessibility, misses many potential audiences, and fails to foster a greater awareness of a musical tradition.

The Skills Necessary for Successful Filk Preservation

This case study has revealed a variety of skills needed by the successful archivist.

Cultural fluency. The communal nature of the filksing means that while there are some notable names such as Leslie Fish, Julia Ecklar, Cynthia McQuillin, Steve MacDonald, and Barry and Sally Childs-Helton, no one is viewed as a star filker in particular (Childs-Helton, 2003, p. 69). According to Launius (2004, p. 2), many filk songs may come across as forgettable and strikingly simplistic, which raises the odds that a rare song of particular depth may go unnoticed by those outside the community. In addition, while more recent materials can be tracked more easily, the reliance on oral tradition and individualized archival work means that many older filk songs have complex authorship, and that ownership remains informal overall (Childs-Helton, 2003, p. 71).

All of this means that without cultural fluency, archivists could easily miss important records. To give just one example, Leslie Fish's 1975 filk "Hope Eyrie," which depicts the landing of an Earth spaceship on a new planet, is considered the national anthem of the pro-space movement and at one point served as the underground anthem of Poland's Solidarnosc trade union (Launius, 2004, p. 4). Yet within the filk community, Leslie Fish's 1977 parody song "Banned from Argo," which depicts the misadventures of a spaceship crew on shore leave, has been better received and has itself been parodied in "The Bastard Children of Argo," having spawned two volumes of parodies and almost five hundred additional verses ("Banned from Argo," *Fanlore*.) Would a casual musicology archivist without knowledge of the filk commu-

nity be able to identify either song as worthy of formal preservation given only their topics and musical styles, let alone know enough of their reception to know how to choose between the two?

Consequently, this case study demonstrates that archivists working with other musical traditions (and smaller communities more broadly) need to develop cultural fluency skills in order to successfully identify and preserve works for future use. These would include the ability to build rapport with members of the community, gain a deeper understanding of the community's values, and make an attempt to understand how the community asserts these values through their practices and methods of claiming ownership of their work. This would also then require archivists to recognize the expertise of individuals in the community. Put another away, fans should be viewed as partners for "prestige-granting institutions" rather than as adversaries by professional archivists because they share the same desire for legitimate, accurate representations of the community and because the strong insight and knowledge they possess about what such a representation would require would be of great use to professional archivists. (Collins, 2015, pp. 128-130; Duffet & Löbert 2015, p. 162).

Technological skills. In the case of filk, its musical records alone are spread over a wide array of textual, audio, and visual recordings that have been made in nearly every major physical and digital format of the last 70 years (amongst those methods that have been available to the general public at low cost). This range will only increase if, similar to other music collections, related memorabilia such as artwork, musical instruments, writings, or merchandise belonging to the filkers themselves are to be added.

Consequently, this case study also reveals how important it will be for archivists to develop a broad technological fluency. Valuable technological skills will likely include knowing how to use an assortment of technological platforms, how to maintain older platforms for future access, and how to cata-

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logue works consistently across multimedia formats such that a user or researcher can access the work from multiple points. It will also mean developing a relative comfort with the fluidity of technological adaption, including a willingness try out different platforms and mediums in real-time alongside members of the community, even if doing so would require the development of coding and website programming skills, and even if it might potentially prove to have been wasted labor in the future.

Ethical and moral awareness. In the case of filk, trying to identify materials for archival preservation will necessitate discussing and answering questions regarding the authenticity of records that are likely still evolving through performances; the ownership and provenance of songs and recordings in an oral tradition; the accurate and ethical depiction of the community's cultural memories in a community that prides itself in being "grassroots," and is wary of outside definition; and ways to communicate and market the work to those outside the community without compromising filkers' own sense of community norms. All of these are also concerns that archivists will have to address with nearly any similar community's archival work, with unique answers as the views and self-awareness of an individual community changes over time. To address these concerns, archivists will need to learn how to engage in dialogue about what can be very emotionally charged topics, develop a sense of mindfulness about archival practices and the relationship of archivists to the communities they serve, and a willingness to approach community members not just as partners but as equals in the creation of the archive. Developing these skills will allow archivists to build the ethical and moral awareness necessary in acting to build community relationships and identifying materials for preservation in accordance with professional ethics requirements regarding an archivist's judgement and trust (Society of American Archivvists Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, 2018).

In conclusion, this case study reveals that the archivists attempting to engage in sound preservation, and in preservation and presentation of subcultural communities more generally, will have to develop not only the technological skills for such work but also the awareness and communication skills necessary to be fluent in the communities they represent, as well as the ability to present such works in a respectful manner. In the case of filk, this would mean providing and introducing the general public to a rich musical tradition in a way that would preserve its grassroots origins as well as its values of community engagement and performance, and that would help it to grow and reach new audiences, thereby ensuring the tradition's continuation into the future.

Notes:

[1] https://kryptonradio.com/voices/thevoicesoffandom.com/

[2] http://www.facebook.com/BillMillsMusic

[3] https://kryptonradio.com/voices/thevoicesoffandom.com/music.html

[4] https://filkyeahfilk.tumblr.com/

[5] https://www.facebook.com/groups/1821008721473434/

[6] https://www.facebook.com/groups/179207275435854/),

[7] https://www.facebook.com/groups/222213818461/

[8] http://interfilk.org.

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