

## Appalachian Sound Archives Fellowship Activities Report

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My research in the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives focused on two 1940s commercial recording bans, the first of which took place from 1942-44 and the second in 1948. With radio and jukeboxes availing themselves of records' potential for repetition, the bans were organized by the musicians' union in an effort to curtail the very technology it argued was putting musicians out of work.

My research used the recording bans as a means of considering a more expansive notion of music as labor, one which includes organized labor but also encompasses a range of musical practice. The Appalachian Sound Archives offered the unique opportunity to explore audio material from spaces affected by the bans as well as material that was both marginal to and outside the bans.

The bulk of my fellowship time was spent listening – to radio transcriptions, to interviews, to sounds of work, and to labor songs. WHAS radio transcriptions from the years of the bans allowed me to hear what was on the radio at the time. Though partial, with selections driven by now unknown interests and intentions of the radio engineers who made the transcriptions, this aural record of an era opened a sonic world of the sounds and patterns of peoples' voices, musical styles, and advertisements through which I gained a sense of how homes sounded and what worlds were brought into families' domestic spaces.

The shifting content and speech patterns through the decade conveyed the shift from a world at war to one grappling with domestic issues (often understood in an international framework) of labor, commerce, and resources. Over the decade radio speech became more consistent, with fewer extraneous noises or regional accents. Speeches by elected officials were made within the thirty minute time slots of radio programming.

I focused my listening primarily on music shows (especially the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance*), discussions of local, state, and national politics, especially around labor. Some key recordings were transcriptions of the 1948 Petrillo hearings and President Truman's speeches about the 1946 rail strike and the Taft-Hartley Bill. These, along with numerous broadcasts on labor during WWII, provided a clear sense of the radical shift in labor policy that took place during the 1940s, as workers organized strikes across the country and federal legislation moved away from the pro labor policies of the New Deal Era to increasingly anti-labor policies.

Additional archival material from WHAS supplemented and expanded my understanding of what I heard, allowing especially for a better awareness of the social and affective space of radio in terms of audience (rural listening centers, broadcast area maps, and consumer demographics), how radio served as a source of musical life and learning, and broadcast rules (including specific directions for how to speak on the radio).

WHAS is a crucial space for understanding the extent and limits of the recording bans. While on the one hand little to no mention is made of them and airtime was filled with

sound of various sorts, WHAS was within jurisdiction of the Louisville local, and hence affected by the bans. At the same time, its location provided it with music that was not under the auspices of the musicians' union. In particular, "hillbilly" musicians were not required to be members of the musicians' union.

This line of relative inclusion makes John Lair's *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* programs especially interesting. Whether intentional or not, in moving from Chicago to rural Kentucky, Lair's program fell outside the domain of a musicians' union. Yet, by virtue of being on radio the shows required payment for song use. That Lair ran his own music publishing company and used many songs he himself published reflects his savvy as a businessman. John Lair's papers provided insight into his negotiations with musicians over pay, while listener mail indicated what kind of listening public was created by the show and its presentation of nostalgia.

Of the Renfro Valley musicians, Lily May Ledford's life and practice is especially interesting for considering a more expansive notion of music as labor. Her memoirs convey the relationship between playing music and other kinds of labor in the context of a rural, subsistence lifestyle. Her career, which began when she went to Chicago to perform on Lair's program and continued through his move to Kentucky, reflects the market for Appalachian music at the time, labor practices around music, and the kind of work that music is, both in terms of wages and practice.

The emergence of commercial and professional opportunities for Appalachian musicians such that music could be a professional option, yielded struggles for pay, especially for pay that would support life, or that might last, with musicians cobbling together jobs on radio and tours. While some of the Renfro Valley musicians were also recording artists, their relation to the musicians' union was tenuous. At the same time, John Lair's work as a producer and the commercial spaces of radio stations more generally clearly convey the business of music.

The opportunity to work in the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives revealed the extent as well as limits of recording bans. When looking at the bans from the perspective of the union they seem to be all encompassing. Yet much sound production had no relation to the bans, including that on radio and recordings, let alone non-archivable live sounds. Berea's wealth of material allowed for a consideration of multi-faceted aspects of music as labor. Blackface on radio emerged as an unexpected subject of interest. I anticipate developing a discussion of sound and racial identification through the case of blackface on radio and its relation to "hillbilly" performance.

The recording bans are an expansive subject; with labor at the center, they open into areas of audio technology, commerce, and the state. Material from the Berea College Appalachian Sound Archives will support two articles. One that lays out conceptual issues of music as labor, incorporates Truman's addresses to congress related to labor and excerpts from the Petrillo hearings. Another article draws on Berea material as an exemplification of these issues, focusing on the aurality of aspects of music as labor, including blackface, Renfro Valley, and sounds of work.