



THE IPOD BLOG

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August 02, 2005 | PLAYLIST

Exhibitions of sound: The digital preservation of music

Part 1: Finding America's musical treasures

By [Mathew Honan](#)

My iPod has all the kind of stuff you'd expect from a person of my generation and proclivities. Essentials from my youth by The Clash, the minutemen, and R.E.M. and new favorites from Talib Kweli., Sufjan Stevens, and The Mountain Goats coexist peacefully in a menagerie of folk, rock, hip-hop, and electronica. But dig deeper, and you'll find not only the latest hits, but also a wealth of classic recordings from artists who passed away long before I drew my first breath.

Blues, Jazz, Country, Folk, and other American Roots music are every bit as compelling to me as anything recorded today. In addition to being great works of art, these recordings represent an integral aspect of our history. Not only is music entertaining—cool and fun to listen to and even record—but it's also an important part of our heritage. Music is a reflection of the culture that created it.

Just as contemporary songs such as Bright Eyes' "When the President Talks to God" or Neil Young's "Let's Roll" are indicative of the times in which we live, so too are historical recordings a window into



Belkin TuneBase FM for iPod (Car Audio)

Belkin TuneCast II (Car Audio)

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the past. From the fears of poverty and post-market crash isolation expressed in The Carter Family's "No Depression," to Woody Guthrie's celebratory come-together anthem from the same era, "This Land is Your Land," music has always helped us to define who and where we are as a people.

In this series, *Playlist* will examine some of this rich musical heritage and explore how it's being preserved. We'll journey down the dusty backroads of Mississippi where old bluesmen still holler into vintage microphones, and to the clean rooms of California, where preservationists struggle to safeguard music for the ages before it disappears.

In this first episode, we'll look at the commercial front, where you can get your music, what's available and how to find it. Next, we'll visit with the archivists and record industry executives making back-catalogues available to learn what's being preserved, and why. Finally, we'll explore the technologies being used to capture our analog past and preserve it for the digital future.

Here Comes The Sun

Getting in touch with our musical heritage is as easy as launching your favorite online music store. iTunes, eMusic, Rhapsody, Napster, and Yahoo! Music Unlimited all feature classic recordings, items just as essential to any serious audiophile's collection as anything that might appear on the Top 40. Whether you're looking for Jazz, Classical, Blues, Country or Folk, you can find it for sale online along with modern recordings and classics in the making.

This past Spring, both [iTunes](#) and [eMusic](#) began selling digital tracks from the Sun Records catalogue online. Memphis' Sun Records, the cradle of rock and roll; the place where Country music came together with the Blues to form something entirely new. Sun was home to many of the legendary rockabilly artists who defined not only rock music, but also the rock and roll lifestyle.

From 1950 until 1966, Sam Philips' Sun Records was chronicling some of the most influential music since Mozart's era. Elvis got his start here, shaking his hips in Sun Studios long before he did so on TV. So did Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Roy Orbison. Even the late, great Man in Black, Johnny Cash, called Sun's Memphis studios home base.

Sun converted its entire catalogue of master tracks to digital, nearly 8,000 recordings in all, including around 1,800 or so songs recorded by Philips himself. (The remainder consisting mostly of tracks from other labels Sun purchased that are now part of the Sun catalogue.) With about 500 tracks currently available, eMusic plans to eventually put

Philips' entire catalogue online, including alternate takes that haven't been released.

Though it was digitized in 1999 and some of it had been available in streaming format, the Sun catalogue had never been made available for download before this year. Many of the recordings were never even released to compact disc, making their last appearance on vinyl. And eMusic has even come across some that are the audiophile's equivalent of the Holy Grail: unreleased recordings.

"I'm surprised at how many tracks I'm finding that, as near as we can tell, have never been released in any format," Scott Ambrose Reilly, vice president of label relations tells *Playlist*. "We found versions of songs that hadn't been released in the first batch, but we went with the superstar artists in the first group. Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash. But as we're getting into Little Milton and some of the artists that weren't superstars, it doesn't seem that these songs have been released at all. Every time I find them I say this can't be right, but we do some research and it is."

Emusic also has a rich catalogue of exclusive live performances and unreleased tracks. It's one of the best places to find live music by both modern and classic artists with performances by old Jazz masters like Louis Armstrong and new recordings by some of today's most influential, if unknown, artists such as Robbie Fulks or Calvin Johnson. Modern live recordings by established masters such as Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys or Taj Mahal bridge the gaps, helping us understand how we journeyed from the Carter Family to Wilco.

"Our model attracts music fans. It's not about just selling a lot of Decemberists tracks, which we do. The Decemberists and Spoon and Bloc Party do well on our site, but so do Howlin' Wolf and Ray Charles," says Reilly. "Our site is about discovering music and the more stuff we have that's hard to find that treats it with the respect it deserves, the more we're going to serve music fans."

Learning the Essentials

Apple's iTunes Music Store is equally compelling for music history buffs, or those who would like to become one. Hidden amongst the glitter and the bling from the boy bands du jour are some of America's gems, and the world's, most important artists, dating back to the early years of American music recording. More importantly, it's often presented in such a way as to help the uninitiated listener find the tracks that truly matter.

Dig into iTunes Essentials and you'll find listings not only for Stereolab and, inexplicably, Poison, but also Bessie Smith, Bill Monroe, Etta James, Muddy Waters, Hank Williams, Ella Fitzgerald, and more. For each artist, Apple provides three different

levels of intimacy. “Basics” will introduce you to a performer’s best-known works, the table stakes for getting to know a particular recording artist. “Next Steps” lists those songs that, while maybe not hit singles, are still accessible and essential for understanding a particular artist or even genre. “Deep Cuts” are much like the drive-time FM format of the same name, tracks that typically were never intended for release as singles at all, but that help paint a full picture of a given musician.

Think Global, Act Global

Yet iTunes and eMusic are hardly the only places to find archival quality music. Indeed perhaps the most notable collection of music in the world, the Smithsonian’s Folkways collection, is now online and available for download at [Smithsonian Global Sound](#) (SGS). SGS features the Folkways collection, plus an extensive library of world music.

Not only does the store offer individual tracks, but it also gives lessons on the history of the music and the artists who made it. The goal, says SGS’ Amy Schriefer, is to serve as a vibrant, interactive museum. Users can search by region and instrument for the sounds of the past and present.

“We want to be the resource for traditional world music,” Schriefer tells *Playlist*. “You can download liner notes, images, and expert curation about the culture and the music. It’s not just music you’re getting on our site; it’s a full spectrum of culture and music. Our primary goal is education.”

Indeed, perusing the SGS website is an education in itself. Searching by instrument, the banjo for example, allows you to drill down into subsets, such as tenor banjos, five string banjos, and related Asian instruments such as the ben cho and jyabisen. You could even concoct your own album of banjo folk from around the world, tracing how it has evolved across time and geography.

“When I think of the possibilities, taking the old concept of the album and projecting it into the Internet future, it’s an open invitation to creativity,” Dan Sheehy, director and curator of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings and SGS project director tells *Playlist*. “The concept of the album was created in the early 60s or so, where a musician would create a set of tracks that were intended to go together, often with a theme like *Sgt. Pepper’s*, on one recording. Now, with the Internet you can have an album that’s seven seconds or seven hours long. This fits right into the museum concept for us. The power and openness of the Internet is really inviting to create new interpretations of the album and exhibitions of sound.”

NEXT UP: In our next story, we’ll talk in-depth with executives at the Smithsonian,

eMusic, Sun Records, and others working to bring our musical past into the digital era.

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