

Sound recordings form a vital part of the American heritage, as much as books or other types of documentation. But they are in some ways even more valuable, since, like photographs, they fix a moment in time to which we have permanent access. Unlike photographs, they offer the full physical and emotional presence of the peoples and traditions that the recording preserves.

Before 1972, in the pre-digital age, these traces of the past on discs and magnetic tape would crumble and decay beyond restoration or recall. Today, we can use the remaining sounds for all their worth as evidence and memory. So there are two reasons that recordings should come under more uniform and long-term control: 1) the encoded sounds are a rich repository for research and recovery of American traditions of every sort, including the heritage of communities, alongside artistic performances of historic worth; 2) digitization can allow those sounds to be fully available for educational purposes, as well as familial, communal, and personal research into roots and heritage. As a practicing scholar and teacher, I value every opportunity to bring recordings into my work in publication and the classroom, activities which benefit the larger society, and full access to these materials is essential for carrying on that work.