Dust-to-Digital: A Case Study

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Abstract:

This case study examines Dust-to-Digital, a music reissue label based in Atlanta, Georgia. The reissue label specializes in the digitization of records produced between 1860-1980. I also discuss Music Memory, the non-profit organization run by Dust-to-Digital, aiming to create an open access music database for students and researchers. This analysis examines the ethical and legal implications of the reissue records created by Dust-to-Digital and Music Memory, and provides solutions for some of the issues and alternatives for consideration.

Keywords:

Digitization, 78 rpm records, Dust-to-Digital, sound recordings

DOI

10.33137/ijournal.v6i1.35265

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Introduction

Tucked away in the closets and attics of grandparents, aunts, and uncles, grows a silent pile of dusty old records that cannot be played. Perhaps you have secretly wondered if those records will ever be played again, given that the record player or the playback machine is nowhere to be found. These days, recorded sound is a given: we exchange Spotify playlists and download music from our favorite streaming services with ease. However, recorded sound in the late 19th and early 20th century was an incredible innovation because it allowed people to bring music into their own homes. Today, these recordings allow us to connect with our past, humanizing history. Unfortunately, technological obsolescence, occurring faster and faster due to increasing innovations in technology, jeopardizes our ability to preserve this recorded sound.

The history of Americana music, which, according to the Americana Music Association, is defined as “a sweeping, all-inclusive home for a wide range of American roots styles that include ‘country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B and blues’” (Berstein, 2017, n.p.), is inextricably linked to the invention of the 78 rpm record. It was during this first era of recorded sound that many unforgettable American classics, such as “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie, and/or “High Water Everywhere” by Charley Patton, were recorded and released to the public. Early recorded sound is a vital part of American history. Prior to the invention of the phonograph, history was silent. There were no recordings of speeches, of music, of life. It is through these early sound recordings that the general public can truly comprehend why certain political figures were so powerful and why certain musicians had such a great impact in their communities (DocSpot, 2017). This case study, an assignment for INF2311 Managing Audiovisual Records at the Faculty of Information, will examine Dust-to-Digital, a music label that releases previously unheard music and reissues of recordings created between 1860 and 1980. Dust-to-Digital also has a non-profit organization called Music Memory, which specializes in the digitization of American 78 rpm records created between 1925 and 1950. Furthermore, I will also provide context on the history of 78 rpm records, why they were so important, and a critical analysis of the ways in which Dust-to-Digital works have helped to protect the legacy of early American sound recordings.

History of the 78 rpm Record

In 1877, Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, which was originally meant for the transcription of telegraphic messages on paper tape (LOC, n.d.). Edison created a diaphragm with a needle for sound recording and for playback, and initially recorded sound vibrations on paraffin paper by speaking through a mouthpiece on the machine (LOC, n.d.). He later used tinfoil cylinders, though realized the material was not durable, so he began using wax-coated cardboard cylinders, instead. This material was more durable, with a playback of around 2 minutes in length (LOC, n.d.). In 1901, the cylinder was mass produced for the public (LOC, n.d.). The last cylinders were produced by the Edison company in 1929 (LOC, n.d.).

The gramophone, invented by Emile Berliner in 1887, worked similarly to Edison's phonograph (Petrusich, 2014, p. 10). Rather than using wax cylinders, the gramophone used discs made of a "jumble of shellac, a cotton compound, powdered slate and wax lubricant" (Petrusich, 2014, p. 10) and later of vinyl that could be easily reproduced and sold across the country for personal use. These discs are also known as 78 rpm records, playing at a speed of 78 revolutions per minute. Most discs measured 10 inches in diameter, with a duration of approximately three minutes per side (Petrusich, 2014, p. 10).

Recorded sound was very impactful on the general population and on the burgeoning music industry. Prior to the introduction of recorded music, listening to music was a communal activity fixed to a certain time and space (Katz, 2004, p. 17). Music recorded onto a disc was affordable, portable and tangible, allowing for the introduction of private listening and the replay of songs (Katz, 2004, pp. 9-14). It also affected the ways in which music was recorded. The short duration of the 78 rpm record forced several musicians, particularly jazz musicians, to reduce the length of their pieces and scale back on the improvisation of pieces to accommodate the 78 rpm duration (Katz, 2004, p. 75).

Pieces of classical and jazz music no longer adhere to the three-minute length once imposed upon musicians at the time. However, this duration had a significant impact on the record-

ing of pop music, which still mostly adheres to the three minute song-length today (Katz, 2004, p. 35). The 78 rpm record became obsolete around the 1960s following the introduction of the 33 ½ long play (LP) record and, later, the 45 rpm record (Petrusich, 2014, p. 10). Unfortunately, many of the 78 rpm records were not made to last, even during their prime. Many record companies only made a single mother masters¹ — used to “stamp” shellac, and later, vinyl copies — of each record, which were often stored in uninsulated buildings, leaving them prone to corrosion. Records were also scrapped to local junk dealers, and melted down during metal and shellac drives during WWII (Petrusich, 2014, p. 78). Other record labels, such as Paramount Records, famous for producing several “race” records through the release of blues records, created records of poor sound fidelity and quality (Petrusich, 2014, p. 77) as a cost saving measure. Due to the rarity and finite nature of this commodity, several of these records have appreciated greatly in value, depending on the artist and the record company in question (Petrusich, 2014, p. 11). Though several archivists, librarians, and other information and sound-recording professionals have played a significant role in the preservation of these records, most material is sourced from the vast private collections of 78 rpm collectors. Their passion for music (and for treasure) are the only reason many of these records survive today. Many reissue records that produce sound recordings from the early 20th century rely greatly on these collectors for the original records, including the music label, Dust-to-Digital.

What is Dust-to-Digital?

Dust-to-Digital was founded in 1999 in Atlanta, Georgia, by Lance Ledbetter, an ethnographer and music lover (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-a). In the late 1990s, Ledbetter purchased *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, originally produced in 1952, and released on CD in 1997 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, after it received critical acclaim from music publications produced during this time (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, n.d.). Listening to this record was a life-changing experience, according to Ledbetter, and ignited his passion for early folk music

¹ To learn more about the production of 78 rpm records, see pg. 70-71 in *Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78 rpm Records*, by Amanda Petrusich.

(Calemine, n.d.). Ledbetter worked as a DJ at the Georgia State University radio station, WRAS, producing a Sunday morning show entitled “Raw Musics,” and began looking for gospel LPs and reissues from the 1920s and 30s. After a fruitless search in town, he contacted Joe Bussard, a 78 rpm record collector, who began sending Ledbetter tapes of old gospel music he had digitized from his record collection for play on the radio (Calemine, n.d.). Struck by how difficult it was to find old gospel records and reissues in record shops, he decided to create Dust-to-Digital, and create reissues of these gospel records himself (Calemine, n.d.).

It was this passion for gospel music that led to the release of the first major work by Dust-to-Digital in 2003, *Goodbye Babylon*, a collection of five CDs featuring over a hundred songs, 25 sermons, and a book complete with “Bible verses, lyric transcriptions, and notes for each recording” (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-b). Sold originally at \$109.95, *Goodbye Babylon* was said to be the “season’s most astonishing box set” by acclaimed music critic Kelefa Sanneh in the New York Times (Reece, n.d.). The box set was a tremendous success for Ledbetter. It was praised highly by several publications, and was even famously purchased by Neil Young as a gift for Bob Dylan (Reece, n.d.). Since their first release, Lance Ledbetter and his wife April have continued to digitize and reissue music, photographs, and texts from around the world, including “Bali, Burma, Cameroon, China, England, Germany, Greece, India, Japan, Java, Laos, Morocco, Persia, Poland, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, Vietnam, Yemen and Yugoslavia” (Reece, n.d., n.p.). However, upon inspection of their shop, genres of music that most often appear on their website include Appalachian (includes a mixture of Old-Time, country, and bluegrass music), Blues, Gospel, and Instrumental music, ranging from the early to mid-20th century. This inconsistency may be due to the fact that they are beholden to certain genres that their customers prefer.

Dust-to-Digital has been nominated for several Grammy awards, most notably winning Best Historical Album in 2008 for *Art of Field Recording Volume I* and Best Historical Album and Best Liner Notes in 2018 for *Voices of Mississippi* (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-a). The label has received acclaim from Pitchfork, calling it a “gold standard reissue label” and from Chuck Reece of the

Bitter Southerner, claiming Lance and April Ledbetter are “the most important preservers of folk music in the modern world” (Reece, n.d., n.p.).

From the information provided on Dust-to-Digital’s website and other sources, the Ledbetters do not own any of these records that they have digitized. Many of these records are created with the help of 78 rpm collectors, allowing the Ledbetters access to their collections. For example, after the release of *Goodbye Babylon*, the Ledbetters worked with Joe Bussard to digitize records created by Bussard’s music label Fonotone Records, active between 1956-1969, with the release of John Fahey’s works (Calemine, n.d.). The Ledbetters also worked with collector Art Rosenbaum to produce *Art of Field Recording Vol. I: Fifty Years of American Traditional Music* (Rosenbaum, n.d.). Dust-to-Digital’s reissues are available for purchase as vinyls and CDs on their website and for digital streaming and download in multiple file formats (MP3, FLAC, etc.) on Bandcamp. Some of their music is also available to stream for free in their “Listening Room” on their website and on music streaming services Spotify and Soundcloud.

In 2012, April and Lance Ledbetter also founded the non-profit organization Music Memory, which aims to “preserve audio recordings for present and future generations” (Music Memory, n.d., n.p.). They aim to continue the work begun by collectors in the 1950s and 60s, with the goal of building a database that includes “audio, discographical information, artist and composer biographies, song lyrics, and notation,” hoping that it will serve as the “Rosetta Stone” of music for future generations (Music Memory, n.d.). They hope to digitize 78 rpm records recorded between 1925 to 1950 from genres which have influenced pop music of today including “jazz, blues, gospel, western swing, rockabilly, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll” (Music Memory, n.d., n.p.). They hope that this database will be of use to researchers, teachers, and interested members of the public (Music Memory, n.d.). Since 2019, Music Memory has digitized over 49,000 sound recordings, which have been used for the works of discographers, writers, and publishers (Music Memory, n.d.).

A Critical Assessment of Dust-to-Digital

Undoubtedly, Dust-to-Digital has contributed enormously to the public's awareness of Americana and international music. The digitization of these records has greatly increased public access to these precious songs, allowing a new generation of listeners to cultivate a taste for music of the early 20th century. For example, were it not for the digitization of jazz musician Billie Holiday's records, I would have never heard her music and become a fan. Music is an inextricable part of culture; by digitizing music of the past, present and future generations are able to feel more connected to their ancestors. Furthermore, Dust-to-Digital excels in their ability to foster long term partnerships with key 78 rpm collectors, libraries, researchers, and artists to create unique reissues and other collectible items. However, there are a few issues regarding Dust-to-Digital that are worth addressing.

The reissue and commercialization of songs from the past is not a new concept. In fact, there are multiple reissue companies that fill a niche for various genres of music. For example, reissue labels Numero Records and Ostinato Records tend to focus on music created in the Caribbean and in Africa (Caroll, 2019). Other companies, such as Lights from the Attic, tend to specialize in the reissue of Japanese music (Caroll, 2019). Every reissue label has a focus, and Dust-to-Digital is no different. Their specialization in Americana music allows them to prioritize certain records. However, this can sometimes lead to an ethical grey zone.

For example, *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947-1959* includes recordings of Black inmates in the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman singing work songs as they worked on the farm, recorded by folklorist Alan Lomax. Lomax himself described these songs as "a vivid reminder of a system of social control and forced labour that has endured in the South for centuries" (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-d, n.p.). Though it is important to bring awareness to this music, it does seem unethical to sell packs of CDs of music created by unpaid Black inmates at \$40.00 USD (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-d). By selling these CDs, Dust-to-Digital is effectively profiting from the free labour (i.e. music) of these imprisoned Black men. Moving forward, it is important for Dust-to-Digital to question the ethical implications of their work and the ways in

which their work may uphold systems of white supremacy, both in the U.S. and internationally. Another point of contention is the variable amount of source material presented alongside each reissue. Some reissue records involving the work of ethnographers and other researchers, such as *Voices of Mississippi*, include ample documentation, including oral histories, documentaries, and essays that help to contextualize the music available on the CDs (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-e). However, other works, such as *Luk Thang: Classic & Obscure 78s from the Thai Countryside* only include a few liner notes and photographs, which likely fails to fully contextualize the music (Dust-to-Digital, n.d.-c). It is clear that the amount of textual material accompanying the music is directly associated with *who* collected the music. Despite claiming to produce well-researched products, it is rather obvious that Dust-to-Digital cares more about representing the context of some types of music over others.

Copyright

A final, rather concerning issue, is that of copyright. As Dust-to-Digital is an American company, a brief synopsis of American copyright law is outlined below for context. The original U.S. Copyright Act of 1909 did not protect or even include sound recordings, as they were a relatively new medium (Public Domain Information Project, 2016). At this point, sound recordings were protected by a number of different state, country, and city laws, creating a murky distribution landscape (Public Domain Information Project, 2016). Sound recordings were first protected at the federal level under the Copyright Act of 1976 (Public Domain Information Project, 2016). According to this amendment, all sound recordings would not enter the public domain until February 15, 2067 (Public Domain Information Project, 2016). The Music Modernization Act of 2018 amended some of the restrictions imposed upon sound recordings in the Copyright Act of 1976 (U.S. Copyright Office, n.d.). These include as follows:

- For recordings first published before 1923, the additional time period ends on December 31, 2021.
- For recordings first published between 1923-1946, the additional time period is 5 years after the general 95-year term.

- For recordings first published between 1947-1956, the additional time period is 15 years after the general 95-year term.
- For all remaining recordings first fixed prior to February 15, 1972, the additional transition period shall end on February 15, 2067.

(Excerpt from the Music Modernization Act, 2018)

Currently, there are no sound recordings in the public domain in the U.S (Public Domain Information Project, 2016). When asked about copyright in a recent interview, Ledbetter stated that he talked with several reissue labels and “found out from them what you’d have to do” (Calemine, n.d., n.p.). Ledbetter adds that “a lot of footwork” is necessary, since many artists and copyright holders are not easily found online, describing gospel music in particular as a “black hole” (Calemine, n.d., n.p.). He was likely able to find labels and artists of certain songs with the help of “researchers and musicologists” (Calemine, n.d., n.p.). According to a study by Brooks (2005), very few rights-holders have allowed legal access to the recordings they control, and this number drops substantially for earlier records (p.190). Brooks (2005) also notes that there is a small and active “network of foreign or small domestic companies, associations, and individuals willing to make historic recordings available, and to some extent does so in spite of laws that force them underground or overseas” (p.192). Under each Dust-to-Digital release, the statement “all rights reserved” is included. However, it is unclear who these “rights” truly belong to. Given the sparse copyright statement and the array of music available in each reissue, one could ascertain that it is highly unlikely that Ledbetter was able to attain copyright from every label and creator, and therefore likely infringes on their rights as a result. Though legal action from a defunct label or the family of a deceased creator’s heirs seems unlikely, it is not outside of the realm of possibility.

Solutions

Fortunately, there are a few ways in which Dust-to-Digital can remedy their errors and challenges. To address the ethical implications of reissuing and capitalizing upon certain records, I would recommend that they hire a social justice consultant to help them create a set of standards

for record reissue. These guidelines can be used as an ethical benchmark, and updated every five years as needed. Concerning the variable metadata and textual documentation found alongside each record, my suggestion would be to collaborate with a researcher to produce well-researched contextual material and ask for digital copies of textual materials from their listeners personal archives. This might include a brief biography of the record company, musicians, and the culture and time period in which this music was produced. Finally, a number of changes are needed pertaining to copyright.

Firstly, more explicit copyright statements should be included. Who owns copyright to this music (i.e. the label, the artist, etc.)? In addition, Dust-to-Digital should consider taking on lower-risk digitization projects. For example, they should consider digitizing more music held within the Library of Congress as well as other libraries and archives, as they are more likely to be the rights holders of the sound recordings. They should also continue to record and digitize the works of artists who are still able to consent to the digitization and distribution of their work. Being more selective with the source of their sound recordings may save them from legal troubles in the long run.

A Critical Assessment of Music Memory

I would also like to touch briefly on the Dust-to-Digital non-profit, Music Memory, as I believe that there are several improvements needed. Thankfully, there are no copyright issues pertaining to the digitization of pre-1972 sound recordings, as per the 2018 Music Modernization Act, so long as the sound recordings are not distributed commercially (U.S. Copyright Office, n.d.). However, since its establishment in 2012, Music Memory has yet to produce any database of music as promised. This may partly be due to a lack of scope and selection criteria. Music Memory's website states that they include music from the "Golden Age of roots music" between 1925 to 1950 (Music Memory, n.d., n.p.). This absence of direction may be due to poor planning, resulting in overwhelming numbers of digitized music requiring additional research. I feel that institutions such as libraries and archives are better equipped to successfully complete projects similar to the

Music Memory database due to their understanding and implementation of appraisal based on a firm understanding of the material. Several checks and balances also exist within the library and archive to ensure that goals are realistic and that the funding is available for these types of projects. There are other collections of 78 rpms available, including the Boston Public Library 78 collection, that have already made records available online via The Internet Archive. These library record collections are simple, yet effective, as the scope is small, and the metadata is concise and useful. It may be useful for Music Memory to release the database to the public as-is, and update it on an ongoing basis, or partner with an archive or library who would be willing to allocate resources towards the project.

Furthermore, Music Memory seems to give the impression that digitization is the only form of preservation of sound recordings on 78 rpms. I would suggest that Music Memory widen the mission of their non-profit to include information on 78 rpm record conservation, as many of the 78 rpms digitized for this database are held in private collections. Keeping the original in good working condition is important as it preserves the sound as it would have originally been heard in the time period in which the sound was recorded. Keeping the original 78 rpm also serves as a backup in the event that the digital file is lost.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of 78 rpm record collectors who are heavily involved in this project. On one hand, it is undeniable that many of these late Americana records would not have been saved were it not for the obsessive and relentless behaviour of collectors such as Joe Bussard, John Tefteller, John Heneghan, Christopher King, and others. Many 78 rpm records were saved by these collectors because of their passion for music and collecting. In fact, a number of collectors, including Joe Bussard and Christopher King, are musicians themselves, or have been the owners of music and reissue labels (Dust-to-Digital, 2016). Most 78 rpm record collectors demonstrate a particular disdain towards newer collectors who are simply in it for the 78 rpm as an appreciating asset (Petrusich, 2014, p. 23). Many of these collectors are keen on sharing this music with others, by hosting private or public listening parties they reintroduce the sounds of the past to a new generation of listeners (Dust-to-Digital,

2016; Petrusich, 2014, p. 19).

Unfortunately, there are many disadvantages to keeping these records within private collections. Records may not be properly stored or maintained, leading to degradation. Moreover, records may not be maintained properly after the death of the collector. In fact, Petrusich (2014) outlines two separate cases in which the records collections of celebrated collectors James McKune and Harry Smith were lost after their death (p. 145). In addition, few private records collectors maintain any additional documents or track the history of the records ownership, resulting in a lack of provenance. Petrusich (2014) discusses one exception, in which John Tefteller, a contentious player within the 78 rpm collecting community, discusses his purchase of Paramount Records material, which includes a rare picture of Charley Patton (pp. 99-101). Petrusich (2014) also documents Christopher King's dismay with collectors who "issued compilations of their finds but failed to procure the necessary support documents — the ones who didn't provide meaningful context for the music they were promoting" (p. 42). Lack of supporting documentation creates space for the mythologization of creators and the ways in which the records were created.

Record collecting is also a distinctly privileged space, as are many spaces within the music industry. Most major players in 78 rpm collecting seem to be white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual men. It was possible for them to access many spaces, many households, and many neighbourhoods because they have the privilege of doing so. Therefore, many of the records created by various cultural communities in the U.S., including Black, Indigenous, and white working-class communities, have been removed from their place of origin, and possibly never heard or known to these community members again. From this lens, 78 rpm record collecting by private collectors does seem rather problematic.

Therefore, it is important for libraries and archives to petition for more funds to create communal spaces for listening to music in their collections within their communities, as there is a keen perception that these records will be lost as soon as they end up in an archive or in a library (Petrusich, 2014, p. 23). Bussard, for example, hosts a radio show where he plays records from his collection for the public (WDVX 89.9, n.d.). Admittedly, it is difficult to replicate this type of

passion for the music within an institutional setting, and would require a lot of money and time to produce. However, this work may be necessary in order to convince records collectors to donate their collections to libraries and archives, where they belong.

Overall, Dust-to-Digital evokes mixed feelings. On one hand, the work they are doing is admirable. Long-forgotten 78 rpm records deserve to be seen and heard by the general public, and it is unlikely that a library or archive would have the resources to make these records available in the same way. However, Dust-to-Digital seems to be in need of an ethical barometer, a greater capacity to manage projects and research, and legal counsel. To truly adhere to their mandate of amplifying rare music, Dust-to-Digital either needs to expand or partner with other institutions to produce high-quality, well-researched products and a finished music database.

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