

## Electronic Currents

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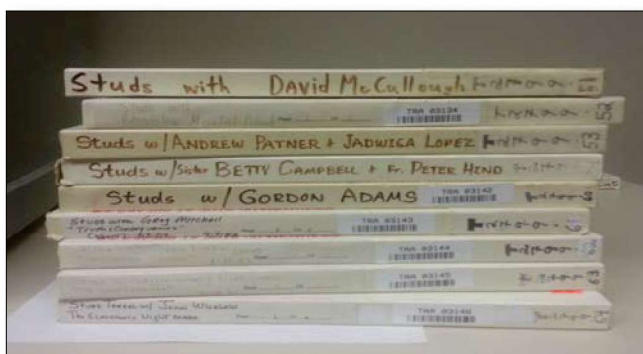
### **Working Together: Partnerships Create the Studs Terkel Radio Archive**

*By Meredith Counts, Sindecuse Museum of Dentistry, University of Michigan*

Pulitzer Prize–winning radio host, author, activist, and oral historian Studs Terkel (1912–2008) shared conversations with leaders, artists, and regular people in his books, on TV, as a collaborator with early video producers, and in a 45-year career on Chicago radio station WFMT-FM. Many of those radio conversations, plus full searchable transcripts, are now accessible online at Studs Terkel Radio Archive (STRA). Launched in May 2018, it is hosted by WFMT at <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com>.

#### **Designing and Using the Studs Terkel Radio Archive**

Studs Terkel's career at WFMT produced an archive of 5,600 reel-to-reel tapes of his radio programs now in the collections of the Chicago History Museum, where Terkel was a Distinguished Scholar in Residence after his 1997 retirement from broadcasting. WFMT hosts the Studs Terkel Radio Archive online, while the museum maintains ownership of the recordings and any associated copyrights (except rights belonging to the creator of works read or performed on the show). The STRA is the most recent of several institutions to share Terkel's work online. To promote further study and engagement, these audio files can even be remixed and repurposed. The project continues Terkel's work in bringing more voices to the table.



*A stack of nine magnetic tape boxes contain recordings of Studs Terkel's radio conversations. They have handwritten descriptive labels and barcode stickers. The Studs Terkel Radio Archive online hosts the digitized audio from these archival tapes. Photograph by Allison Schein Holmes.*

An official podcast introduces listeners to curated recordings from the archive, and a variety of tools allows users to search the recordings and make their own remixes. The STRA has a custom descriptive metadata schema and full interview transcription that enhances searchability. The transcripts are searched using custom terms, evolved for better usability over the project's short lifespan.

The descriptive metadata for the project was customized with a broad range of users in mind. WFMT archivist Allison Schein Holmes worked with others to determine and refine categories. "We didn't cater to academic metadata schema," she said in conversation.<sup>1</sup> They knew some information, like recording date, would be important. Terms specific to occupations reflect the focus that Terkel, son of hotelkeepers, one-time WPA employee, and author of 1974's *Working* had on people's jobs. Schein Holmes said her team wanted to keep the website's searchable schema broad. With the help of a technical librarian, the initial cataloging system was developed, and the system was refined once cataloging began.<sup>2</sup>

The cloud hosting system, Starchive by DigitalReLab, automatically creates derivative remix files from the MP3s on the web to MP4s so visitors can remix and repurpose files to create their own audiocollage projects using the browser-based Hyperaud.io remix tool.<sup>3</sup> Visitors can create clips from different sections of different shows to make their own combinations. Remixing allows website visitors to reuse and rearrange audio much like Terkel himself reused his older clips from the WFMT archives in new programs.

Transcription is done with the vendor Trint, and the automated transcription is refined by a team of Chicagoans. Having that full text available and searchable furthers usability. In *The Oral History Review*, Gerald Zahavi says the archive "seamlessly integrates text and audio, providing users with interactive transcripts. It does this utilizing a very sophisticated and versatile text-to-audio/video software, Hyperaudio..., that also provides copy, cut and paste functionality."<sup>4</sup>

## History

The STRA garnered press coverage, especially in Terkel's longtime home of Chicago. Reporters covered the CHM's \$60,000 NEH planning grant; its partnership with the Library of Congress for in-kind digitization services (worth more than \$900,000 as of 2016<sup>5</sup>); and the kickstarter campaign supported by Illinois senator Dick Durbin and actor David Schwimmer which brought in more than \$87,000.<sup>6</sup> More news coverage came when WFMT took on the responsibility of hosting the archive online.<sup>7</sup>

Zahavi compared the STRA to an earlier project, 2002's Studs Terkel: Conversations with America project, between Chicago History Museum and Matrix: The Center for Digital Humanities and Social Sciences at Michigan State University. Not surprisingly, given tech advancements of the last 15 years, he concludes, "the Studs Terkel Radio Archive offers far wider and more comprehensive access to Terkel's full body of work."<sup>8</sup>

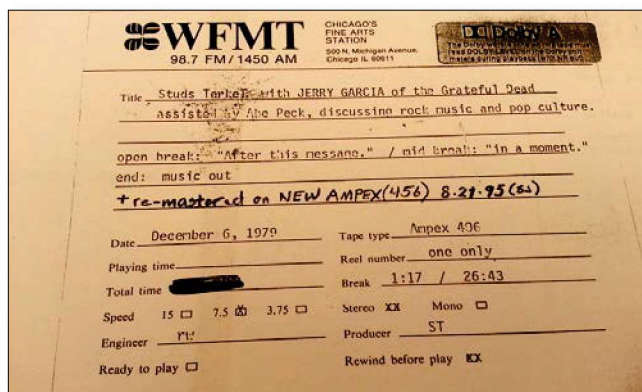
Chicago's Media Burn is another source for online Studs Terkel media at [www.mediaburn.org](http://www.mediaburn.org). This independent video archive provides access to more than 1,500 hours of archival video.<sup>9</sup> Founded by documentary producer Tom Weinberg, a collaborator and friend of Terkel's, Media Burn also hosts a Terkel video collection. This collection was digitized through partnerships in 2008 and 2009 with grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation.<sup>10</sup>

In a 2012 paper, Media Burn's executive director Sara Chapman noted the challenges of preserving historical media that was never intended for long-term archival purposes. Because of magnetic tape's finite lifespan, digitizing tapes is both a time-sensitive and time-intensive process.<sup>11</sup>

## Comparing STRA Digital Files to IASA Standards

The WFMT program recordings are being digitized in batches by the Library of Congress's Audio Visual Conservation Center, which began digitization for the Chicago History Museum before WFMT joined up to create and maintain the website. Resulting master WAV files are preserved, and now smaller MP3 files are uploaded to the website. Digital files go to WFMT's archivist; the tapes are returned to the Chicago History Museum.

WFMT's archivist Allison Schein Holmes provided access to two master WAV files for comparison, one digitized in 2012 and another in 2018. The metadata of these files can be compared to the standards recommended by the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA), especially in section 2 of its 2009 *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects* (IASA TC-04 for short). The fact that STRA's digital recordings are in WAV file format containers complies with one of IASA's main recommendations. WAV files with audio in Linear Pulse Code Modulation (LPCM) format are uncompressed and are said to be easy to manipulate. The WAV archival masters are so large, though, that derivatives are made in more portable file types, MP3, for the web.



*A WFMT-FM label of magnetic tape from the Studs Terkel Radio Archive shows a conversation with Jerry Garcia was recorded December 6, 1979, on Ampex 406 and remastered on NEW AMPEX 456 on 8-21-95. Photograph by Allison Schein Holmes.*

## Some reflections after comparing STRA files with IASA standards:

- The STRA master audio files have a rate of 16 bits and meet audio CD standards if not IASA's highest 24 bit standards. Since the recordings are mostly of people talking, 16 bit seems appropriate for the relatively narrow range of sounds.
- IASA encourages a minimum sampling rate of 48 kHz,<sup>12</sup> but the STRA tapes used a slightly lower sampling rate, 44.1 KHz, again standard with CDs.
- Two STRA WAV files, digitized six years apart, reflect changes in descriptive metadata. More metadata, like copyright information, is attached to the file digitized in 2018 than to the one digitized in 2012.

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A conversation between Terkel and James Baldwin is punctuated with the sounds of matches lighting Baldwin's cigarettes or Terkel's cigar.<sup>13</sup> Another recording begins with a loud squeak of a door. Schein Holmes says there was no question of smoothing the audio out. "I think that's just a function of how radio was," that the additional sounds are "a by-product of the times."<sup>14</sup>

This matches up with the "Key Digital Principles" chapter of IASA TC-04, which says,

The unintended and undesirable artifacts in a recording are also part of the sound document, whether they were inherent in the manufacture of the recording or have been subsequently added to the original signal by wear, mishandling or poor storage. Both must be preserved with utmost accuracy.<sup>15</sup>

### Copyright and Access

Schein Holmes added, "The only editing we do is to remove copyrighted information—everything else remains true. We keep in the test tones, we keep in the cigarettes, the cigar, the sounds of people moving... to preserve the archival record as much as possible for the public."<sup>16</sup>

When Terkel or his guests perform copyrighted material, those passages often remain in the digital file as long as the surrounding discussion gives enough contextual information and is allowed under fair use. If part of a recording is removed, then a note explaining the removal is put into the text description on the webpage. However, users can request full access to the original file via a streaming, limited-time link with password protection.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

Aside from evolving metadata and backend updates, the main change to the Studs Terkel Radio Archive website since its 2018 launch has been the adding of new, digitized and transcribed recordings once they are available. Allison Schein Holmes said Studs Terkel "was the biggest user of his own archive."<sup>18</sup> Now, the public can give him a run for it, and continue listening to and working with his archive.

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### Notes

1. Allison Schein Holmes, telephone interview with author, November 22, 2019.
2. Holmes, interview.
3. Tony Macaluso, "What to do with 5,600 Studs Terkel shows? Lessons from working to bring archive to life at the WFMT radio network," *Radio World* 40, no. 21(2016), 12.
4. Gerald Zahavi, "Studs Terkel Radio Archive," *The Oral History Review* 46, no. 2 (2019): 444–447, [muse.jhu.edu/article/737002](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/737002).
5. Macaluso, "What to do with 5,600 Studs Terkel shows?," 12.
6. Zahavi, "Studs Terkel Radio Archive," 444–447.
7. Rick Kogan, "Studs Terkel Radio Archive is a wealth of American history in the making," *The Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/ct-studs-terkel-radio-archive-ae-0124-20160121-column.html>.
8. Zahavi, "Studs Terkel Radio Archive," 444–447.
9. Sara Chapman, "Guerrilla Television in the Digital Archive," *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 1 (2012): 42–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jfilmvideo.64.1-2.0042>.
10. Chapman, email.
11. Sara Chapman, "Guerrilla Television in the Digital Archive," 42–50.
12. IASA Technical Committee, *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects*, ed. Kevin Bradley (2009): 8.
13. "James Baldwin discusses his book *Another Country* and his travels through Africa," interview by Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, September, 29, 1962, audio, The Studs Terkel Radio Archive, <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/james-baldwin-discusses-his-book-another-country-and-his-travels-through-africa>.
14. Holmes, interview.
15. IASA Technical Committee, *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects*, 8.
16. Holmes, interview.
17. Holmes, interview.
18. Holmes, interview.