

Marc Kirkeby

MUSIC ARCHIVIST

Marc Kirkeby has always loved just about every type of music he could get his hands on. As a Boy Scout, he built his own radio and would stay up at night listening to all the far-away stations it picked up. By college, he had collected records of all kinds—pop, country, jazz, and classical. He eventually brought his vast musical knowledge to Sony Records, where he currently works as a music archivist. Part historian, part detective, and part engineer, Marc identifies very old recordings and figures out how to save them so that you and I will have the chance to listen to them. Some of the material he works with dates back over a hundred years. Think of the important historical recordings that would be lost forever if it weren't for music archivists like Marc who keep music alive for us and future generations!



By Dorothy Mak

What are the main elements of your job?

A major component of my job is research. I spend a lot of time in the studio working with a recording engineer to listen to master tapes that have not been identified. We use a combination of internet resources, old catalogues, and our thinking caps to try and figure out what these recordings are. The other piece of what I do is work with various studio engineers to transfer materials for preservation. Many of the original master recordings are old and falling apart—the earliest material that Sony has is from about 1902–1903. We want to make sure that a whole range of music from many different time periods gets preserved and becomes available going forward.

Where does this mysterious, unidentified music come from?

For the most part, this material is held by the major record companies in private vaults around the country. But there are also collections of original recordings and records that people have in their

attics or garages. People have been collecting records for a hundred years, and you never know what somebody has. I've come across some really amazing and valuable things [in private homes].

What kinds of technology do you use for your work?

A whole bunch. We take yesterday's recording methods and translate them into today's music formats. That means I need to understand a century's worth of old studio techniques, and I need to keep up with the present. I work with special turntables that play old records and old disc masters—some of them have to be played backwards!—as well as studio tape decks that can handle all sizes of magnetic recording tape. Sometimes I even work with music cylinders, which date back to the 1890s and look like soup cans. That's where the expression “canned music” comes from.

We pass the sound from these old sources through an electronic converter and into digital form. Then we use computer software to catalogue and store the music. If we're preparing the music for release, on a CD, for example, we


then use other software to “clean up” the sound, removing hiss and pops and clicks, while trying to bring out as much of the music as possible.

What's been a great musical discovery?

We recently did a project with the estate of Johnny Cash. He had a whole room in his own recording studio full of tapes that spanned more than 50 years of his work. This material had never been

documented anywhere, so we worked with his son and other people familiar with Cash's career, and we identified all of those tapes.

What's most rewarding about being a music archivist?

The best part for me is making sure the music is preserved. There are so many places today that could carry unique, historic recordings, but if the material is just sitting on a rusty old plate in an abandoned warehouse, then nobody will ever get to hear it. It's very fulfilling to save these recordings and make them available for the public. 



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