



The Whitman Recording

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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Folsom, Ed. "The Whitman Recording." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 9 (Spring 1992), 214-216.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1340>

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4 "On the Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk" citations are from *Cowper's Shorter Poems*, ed. W. T. Webb (London: Macmillan, 1896), 38-41. The line numbers appear in parentheses.

5 "Passage to Less than India: Structure and Meaning in Whitman's 'Passage to India,'" *PMLA* 88 (October 1973), 1095-1103.

THE WHITMAN RECORDING

One event at the recent Whitman Centennial Conference held at The University of Iowa from March 26-29, 1992, was the playing of a tape-recording of what may be an 1889 or 1890 wax-cylinder recording of Walt Whitman reading four lines of his late poem "America" ("Centre of equal daughters, equal sons"). It turns out that this recording has been available for some time, but very few people knew about it. I had long heard rumors that such a recording existed—a number of people had told me they vaguely recalled hearing it in the early 1950s—but the first substantiation came when Professor Larry Griffin of Midland College in Texas submitted an essay to the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* last year. Griffin's essay, "Walt Whitman's Voice," appeared in the Winter 1992 issue of *WWQR*; in a note to his essay, Griffin mentioned the existence of a cassette recording of a program that contained Whitman's voice; the cassette had been available for years in the Midland College Library.

This cassette, it turns out, contained a recording of a radio broadcast of a program narrated by Leon Pearson, a well-known NBC newsman (and brother of Drew Pearson). The program was broadcast on NBC Radio in 1951, part of a series called "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow." In the program, Pearson introduces the Whitman recording by saying that the cylinder, from the "remarkable Roscoe Haley Collection in New York," was badly damaged when NBC engineers received it, but that they were eventually able to retrieve the four lines of "America." Roscoe Haley, born in Tennessee in 1889, was an elevator operator who lived in New York City until his death in 1982; an eccentric collector, his Manhattan apartment was jammed full of recordings, books, and papers. Apparently, after the initial broadcast, Haley's Whitman recording faded into near-oblivion.

The rediscovery of the Whitman recording this year generated a good deal of media attention. William Grimes wrote a substantial piece about the recording in the *New York Times* (March 16, 1992), and it was featured on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" (March 20, 1992) as well as CBS television's "Sunday Morning" (April 19, 1992). Associated Press stories about the recording were reprinted across the country, and many radio and television stations in the United States and Canada carried reports of the find. A letter dated February 14, 1889, and signed by Thomas Edison, expressing his interest in trying to "obtain a phonogram from the poet Whitman," turned up in the files of the Edison Institute. Edison's letter is addressed to his associate Jesse H. Lippincott; it is in response to a letter Edison had received from Whitman's Boston admirer, the journalist Sylvester Baxter, who had written to Edison urging him to record Whitman's voice. So far, no corroborating evidence has been found among Whitman's papers or those of the poet's friends and associates.

The NPR "Morning Edition" program contained an interview with Sam Brylawski at the Recorded Sound Reference Center at the Library of Congress, who questioned the authenticity of the recording because it sounds "too good to be real." "This has either been exceptionally well equalized or it's a fake," he said, suggesting that "recording in the 1890s was crude at best. . . . All recordings were enormously noisy. What you have here on this recording is a voice that comes through really loud and clear. The surface noise on the cylinder is pretty much in the background." But other experts disagree with Brylawski's analysis, and the consensus of those who have experience with wax cylinder recordings is that the recording is in fact an authentic 1890-era wax cylinder. Dave Beauvais, for example, who operates Magic Media Services in Amherst, Massachusetts, writes:

What the audio technicians at the Library of Congress seem to have missed, in puzzling over the "superbly equalized" quality of this recording, is the fact that virtually *all* vertically cut Edison cylinders, as well as the vertically cut Edison "Diamond Disk" recordings of pre-World War I vintage, exhibit this superlative richness, balance, and freedom from distortion in the lower and middle portions of the audible spectrum. They sound like they've been perfectly equalized—but that's just the way they were cut, acoustically. . . . The near-perfect equalization was inherent in the Edison process. . . . So the recording technicians at the Library of Congress, incredulous about the quality of sound of this purported 1890 recording, have simply and ironically blundered their way into the historical tomb of the Edison mystery. I'm only amazed they haven't done their homework on period recordings, though they're certainly not the first ones to disbelieve their ears when stumbling upon vertical-cut artifacts. Still and all, Tom Edison must be spinning in his own grave, when Library of Congress technicians claim that no one could have laid down sound this good, or this well-equalized, or this impervious to surface scratch, in 1890. . . . Every collector knows that Edison's vertical cut process allowed him to make recordings which were literally 30 years ahead of their time. We hear them today, and we're simply dumbfounded to realize that sound so clean could have been laid down at the turn of the century, using a completely non-electrical process.

Beauvais also offers a linguistic analysis of the voice on the recording: "It exhibits a quaint and subtle regional inflection—a soft mix of Tidewater Atlantic and an Adirondack dilution of the contemporary New York accent—which has quite literally disappeared in our age. No one speaks this way any more. The notion that someone might have set out to imitate such a subtle and nuanced archaic inflection strains credibility just a bit." Beauvais concludes that he believes the recording is "the genuine artifact."

The positive impact of a discovery like this one is that it gets people talking and searching and arguing; new and illuminating discoveries are bound to emerge, whether or not they lead to confirmation or denial of the authenticity of the recording. In the meantime, you can decide for yourself whether or not you think it is Whitman's voice; the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* is offering a cassette tape of the original recording, along with several re-engineered versions which remove a good deal of the noise of the cylinder (send a check for \$10 to *WWQR*, 308 EPB, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242). The re-engineered versions are the result of the latest sound-reduction technology; sound-reduction engineering was done by BMG and Masterdisk and coordinated by Lowell Cross, Director of the Recording Studios at The Uni-

versity of Iowa School of Music.

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