

J-DISC Project Briefing Handout

Tad Shull

The Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University

Background to J-DISC: Why Jazz Discography—and Why Digital?

Drummer Max Roach, one of the creators of modern jazz, often said that “records are our textbooks.” It is indeed hard to understand, even imagine, the profound social and artistic impact of the emergence of jazz and its dissemination as a global cultural phenomenon in the last hundred years without reference to its recordings.

As recording technology evolved, so did jazz. The popularity of ragtime music, which provided thematic material for the earliest jazz improvisations, notably by musicians from New Orleans, was fueled by piano rolls—a form of recorded performance—as early as the 1890s. The appearance of the first jazz recordings in 1917 roughly coincides with the entry of the word “jazz” into common parlance in the news media, who often decried the artistic and moral validity of what they saw as a plebeian insurgency stoked by the phonograph’s popularity. Throughout the next three decades, the northern migration of African-American laborers to the nation’s urban centers peaked just as recordings became a full-fledged industry, and thus gave rise to the genre of “race records”—then one of the few contemporary articles of mass production targeted to a black audience. The same combination of industrial development, recording technology, and emergence of a novel mass culture helped popularize artists of the swing craze and big band era to both white and black audiences across the country.

The progress of jazz toward international recognition as a serious, distinct art form around the middle of the century paralleled the development of advances in recording technology that could capture its nuances and innovations and could advance its mass distribution. The profound influence of jazz on 20th century art forms—film and video, radio, painting, sculpture, theater, and dance—would likewise have been impossible without the accessibility, appreciation, and study of recorded examples. Historians and theorists of aesthetics now recognize that recording improvised performances raised fundamental questions about what it means to be musically literate and how knowledge about music is taught and handed down.

The compilation and study of systematic data on jazz recordings, however, has been left until very recently to amateurs, journalists, and independent researchers. They relied largely on data created by record companies for commercial purposes, or their own record collections. Since jazz discographies first appeared in the 1930s, their creators have lent their spare time and painstaking labor to improve their data in the face of such limited resources. (For a variety of historical reasons, comparable attempts at creating complete discographies for opera, classical, and popular music have not been fruitful.)

Unfortunately, the organization of data in these discographies makes research difficult. The original data were in large part generated by recording companies to create a record of what was put up for release, and not what was recorded and then not released, which scholars and jazz listeners are often interested in. Entries are categorized only by artist/leader, which must be looked up first in order to find all other types of data about the creation, production, and dissemination of a recorded work. Researchers therefore cannot easily find interesting juxtapositions, explore causal relationships, or gain interpretative insights. The print editions of

discographies are also expensive and hard to find, even in the best libraries. CD-ROM versions of these discographies exist, but they are out of date even before they are put up for sale, are very expensive, and new editions must be bought every year. A rare exception to this resource gap can be found at <http://www.jazzdiscography.com>, which offers a thorough, usable electronic tool for creating individual artist discographies and examples of such works.

A wealth of discographic material on jazz recordings in print, CD-ROM or online versions is now in danger of being lost. Because of the precarious state of music publications and of newspapers, the discographic data they generated in the past have disappeared. Due to similar changes in the music industry with the onset of the Internet, corporate bookkeeping can no longer be relied on to keep discographies up to date. Most recordings for the last five years have been made by boutique companies and individual musicians themselves. These new recordings, both in compact disc and in compressed virtual form on the Internet, are being produced at a remarkable rate, but the pertinent recording data are not being preserved. Information about recordings that was “born digital” is at risk of dying in the same mode. Digital jazz recordings are being produced in Europe and Asia, making their discographic information still harder to gather and verify.

As the Center for Jazz Studies began exploring the limitations in current discographies, we realized that open access and open source principles and methods could help overcome them, and that led to our work on J-DISC. Internet connectivity is an obvious boon for sharing the data on jazz recordings that have long fascinated experts and amateurs alike, but no one to our knowledge has done so in a systematic way. By loading a large swath of data into an online database and enabling users to perform advanced searches in all categories of data, jazz discography can go beyond simply cataloging records and help illuminate a panorama of jazz history across borders and discrete stylistic niches. Inviting jazz experts to work in the database from remote locations and continually enhance the data allows new discoveries and techniques in the field to be immediately stored and shared in a single easily accessed location. Features that allow these experts to cite, evaluate, and compare existing discographic data help them demonstrate to their field what the best of our knowledge is about a given recording for which data may be questionable or incomplete. Discussing and managing discographic data with a panel of expert collaborators allows these key end users to help develop and refine our editorial policy and functions, which any publishing venture online or off must have. Our aim in creating J-DISC as a collaborative, open access tool is thus to provide the emerging field of jazz studies with a common, foundational reference tool it now lacks.

Although jazz studies is our primary concern in this project, we hope that it may serve, where appropriate, as a model for discographies in other types of recorded music. This is particularly true of those forms in which the performance has no corresponding notated version. These include various “folk” (i.e., vernacular music of non-professionals), ethnic or non-Western musics; classic and modern blues; and experimental music of the jazz tradition. Even in the study of classical music, reference to recordings can serve a valuable purpose in guided research: to compare varying realizations of classical compositions or document live performances by noted performers. Certain collaborative features or metadata models of the PJDD may be of interest in documenting other art forms involving numerous creative personnel and complex production and distribution processes, such as film or video.