

## ARTICLE



### **THE BOB NELSON COLLECTION OF FOLK MUSIC** by John Vallier

Bob Nelson approached the University of Washington Libraries in May 2011. He was eager to tell my colleagues and I about the collections of Pacific Northwest folk music he had been compiling, organizing, and digitizing. He regaled us with stories of hoots and wowed us with his commitment to preserve the recordings that document this rich history. As committed to the archival task as he was (and still is), he asked us for a bit of technical assistance and wondered if UW Libraries could provide a home for the recordings, an archival home where they could be accessed by the public for generation to come.

I was excited about the recordings. They fit perfectly into UW's efforts to [document NW music](#). I told him that we could probably collaborate on the project (he digitizes and describes the recordings, we make them accessible), but I also told him to keep his expectations low. In this brave new age of budget cuts and tuition hikes even such an ideal collaboration could lose support with the next swing of Olympia's fiscal ax.

Somehow, mostly by dint of Bob's efforts and those of graduate student Lauren Work, we made it happen. The Bob Nelson Collection of Folk Music is now represented in an online guide open to all (with an Internet connection): <http://guides.lib.washington.edu/nelson>

It currently stands at 141 tracks with nearly 8 hours of continuous music, but will grow as we add more tunes. The site also includes biographical notes about artists featured in these recordings, an evolving and detailed list of the collection's entire contents, and Bob's own first person overview of the collection's significance and scope. The collection as a whole—which is greater than the sampled tracks we have posted online—spans over 60 years of music making and includes hundreds of recordings made by dozens of musicians in and around the Pacific Northwest. From "hoots" and living room jams, to radio broadcasts to festival concerts, these recordings reflect Bob's lifelong commitment to music making, listening, and collecting.

As he notes, "what you will hear in this collection of music is an audio history of the folk music I have been around all my life. These recordings all came from the hoots, small gatherings, jam sessions, live concerts and practice sessions of many friends. These were not commercial quality recording made in studios by audio engineers. Instead they mostly come from cheap tape recorders sitting on coffee tables in various living rooms and kitchens. A few recordings were made in radio and TV broadcast studios, or on the occasional concert stages where the audio equipment was better. What you hear is what you get."

Bob recorded many of the artists featured in the collection (himself included), but other recordists and collectors also contributed to its contents. "This collection came from several sources. The largest number came from tapes that I personally made and saved over the years. My collection starts in 1954. In addition, I was given many reel-to-reel recording from Patti DiLudovico. She was discarding her tapes as I happened to drive in her driveway (I beat the garbage truck by two hours). I also received wonderful collections from John Ashford and Ed Bremer. All of these people gave me their recordings. Both of these people generously gave me their recordings in the hopes that they would be preserved for future generations."

Moses Asche may have said that "Librarians are the best evaluators of folk music" (Asche 1965: p 31), but I think including the folk musicians themselves in that evaluative process yields the most significant results. That's what we have in the Bob Nelson Collection, a true partnership that matches complementary interests and specialties.

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Moses Asch. "Folk Music." Notes, Second Series, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Dec., 1956), pp. 29-32

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