Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with… is a new series from Ràdio Web MACBA that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. The documentary series is being presented this spring at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in a prospective conference/listening format, where four collectors have been invited to share the concerns and particular characteristics that have driven them to build their personal collections. This is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

This is a conversation by email between Rick Prelinger, Anna Ramos, Vicki Bennett and Jon Leidecker, which took place on April 2011.

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Rick Prelinger is an archivist, writer, filmmaker, and outsider librarian. Rick has partnered with the Internet Archive (of which he is a board member) to make 2,100 films available online for free viewing, downloading and reuse. His archival feature *Panorama Ephemera* (2004) played in venues around the world. He's now working on a second feature tentatively entitled *No More Road Trips*. He has also recently made several film programs that he categorizes as "historical interventions," called *Lost Landscapes of San Francisco* (five annual parts) and *Lost Landscapes of Detroit*. He frequently speaks on the future of archives and issues relating to access to archives and culture. With Megan Prelinger, he's co-founder of Prelinger Library, an appropriation-friendly private research library open to the public in downtown San Francisco.

Prelinger Archives: http://www.archive.org/details/prelinger
Richard Prelinger's website: http://www.prelinger.com
Prelinger Library: http://www.prelingerlibrary.org

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH…
Rick Prelinger

01. Conversation with Rick Prelinger on his film collection

When and why did you become interested in ephemeral films? Did you collect anything else before? What drew your attention to that kind of material?

I've always collected things, but I think understanding the systems that underlie collections and learning what the arrangement of things can reveal were more interesting to me than the things themselves, at least in the beginning. I collected everything kids collect and more – rocks, shells, road maps, 45 rpm records, and the weekly radio surveys listing the top 40 or 60 songs. Later, I collected found photographs from the trash outside photo labs. Most of these interests came and went, and almost none of these collections stayed with me.

In 1982 friends of mine released *The Atomic Café,* a documentary film about the cold war. It was very successful, and some of them were offered funding to make *Heavy Petting,* which was then described as a kind of *Atomic Café* of sex and romance in the post-World War II era. I had always been interested in archival film, but I was working as a typesetter (a now-extinct occupation) at the time, and when they hired me to direct the archival research on the film, I was able to quit my night job and start working in film.

Since *Heavy Petting* was a film about concepts and ideas, we had to think creatively about the kind of footage that we might use in the film. And since gender and sexuality were so strongly overdetermined by the public persuasions that trickled through American culture, I started looking for the kinds of films that had taught us how to be good boys and girls, attentive students, hard workers, obedient consumers and loyal citizens. I found them in the vast universe of what I now call ephemeral films – films produced for specific purposes at specific times, not intended for long-term preservation. Educational films attempted to train students in predictable and socially appropriate behavior. Over 200 educationals made from 1946 through 1960 focused on social guidance, dating and sexuality. Industrial films instructed workers in appropriate conduct and trained them how to do their jobs properly. Sponsored and advertising films promoted specific products, burnished the image of corporations or advocated ideas on behalf of companies and nonprofit organizations. It was a rich and exciting world that almost no one knew anything about, and very few people were collecting this material.

In the early eighties, film was giving way to video, and many of the production companies (some of which had started before World War I) were going out of business. Libraries and school film collections were also being liquidated. Many people who had worked in the ephemeral film industry were also retiring and had saved material. Tremendous numbers of films were available for free or at low prices, and I started to collect everything that I could. This period of transition in the non-theatrical film industry pointed out how media-rich a country the U.S. is – I'm certain we throw away more media than most other nations ever produce.

Why did you draw the line at that specific timeframe (1927–87)?

The timeframe that I often cite as the boundaries between which most ephemeral films were made is quite arbitrary. It begins with the general introduction of sound on film, in 1927, even though experimental sound films were made before then, and ends in 1987, when almost every producer had stopped working in film.

I didn't draw a line as far as what I collected, though. I have many films from the

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

period 1903–27, and have recently gotten interested in silent films made by the Bell System (the former U.S. telephone monopoly) in the twenties.

Did you know of any other people or institutions collecting those types of films? What about now? Are there any institutions or individuals actively collecting them? In other collecting fields there is a certain rivalry factor. Does a similar dynamic apply to this material?

When I began to collect, I knew of perhaps three other people who were collecting these films. While there were thousands of film collectors, almost no one was focusing on ephemeral films. The one thing I did that was very different from what the others were doing was to collect original and 'preprint' materials – in other words, the master elements that either had gone through the camera on the day of shooting or the materials used to make release prints for projection. While other collectors just collected release prints, often worn and damaged, I was concerned with trying to save the best-quality material possible, as I felt there would never be funding to properly preserve the films and it therefore made sense to try to find and collect the best copies I could.

Though very few collectors (and only one organized archival institution) focused on these films in the early eighties, they've now made their way into the cultural mainstream, and many of them are sought as collectibles. In fact, the U.S. Library of Congress has acquired the three major collections of ephemeral films – about 60,000 from me in 2002–03, the American Archives of Factual Film collection several years later, and the incomparable collection of J. Fred MacDonald at the end of 2010. I'd estimate several hundred individuals in the U.S. collect ephemeral film materials, and most archives that come into possession of these kinds of films now hold onto them.

There is rivalry between individual collectors, and you can see it on eBay every day. But the interest in collecting physical film is starting to wane. I think the fair market value of most film material has dropped a great deal in the last few years, as many collectors shift to video-based materials and fewer and fewer people have the space and time to deal with large collections of physical objects.

I have always detested the psychology of collectors – the competition, the secrecy, the covert pleasure in acquiring something cheaply because the seller didn't know its real worth. I now can only justify collecting if I make a large portion of my collection available to the public in some way. Doing so can be a life-changing experience, as I discovered it was for me after putting some 2,000 films online at Internet Archive.

Do you also collect memorabilia related to the material?

Many ephemeral films are like floating historical objects; we know little about why they were made or the conditions under which they were produced and screened. Looking at the film can help us understand these things, but it often raises more questions than it answers. I therefore collect brochures, distribution catalogs, advertising and other print ephemera relating to the films and the companies that made them. In fact, I've been collecting books and other print materials that contextualized the films and explained twentieth-century America since about 1986, and my collection is now part of the library of printed materials that my spouse and I maintain in San Francisco. The library is open to the public two days a week for people to use and to copy materials for their own projects.

I do not collect projectors, cameras, production equipment or other large, three-dimensional objects.

From your own point of view, what's the value of ephemeral films? Most of them are not conceived to last.

I was drawn to the material because it contained dense representations of everyday life, culture, labor and leisure. It seemed as if almost anything you could imagine turned up in these films. You could see body language from fifty years back, and they were full of images showing what the American city and small town looked like a long time ago. Quite often the periphery of the image was full

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

of fascinating visual information. In addition to showing what America looked like, the films also documented the persuasions of the past. They revealed the rhetoric and the process by which consensus is manufactured, and went a long way towards helping me understand some of the less-apparent features of the way we often think in America. Watching and working with these films was a fascinating, privileged look into aspects of America I had never seen and did not understand, and I believe I learned a great deal from them.

In his lecture, Mark Gergis asked himself rhetorically what collecting was, whether it was a service or a disservice. Even though his is a sound collection, part of the material he pursues is also seen as ephemeral in the cultures of origin, where it is understood that older material may lose its value over time and is therefore disposable. Can you reflect on this?

I interpret this question to mean: does collecting ephemeral material violate some kind of implicit cultural contract under which the original documents were made or distributed?

It's never occurred to me that some might consider it a disservice, or inconsistent with the spirit of the original documents, to collect and make these kinds of films accessible. On the contrary, I think it's a disservice to accept their ephemerality. The default condition of most ephemera is to disappear, decompose or be destroyed, which is why we call it ephemera. There is no such thing as an absolute representation of an event, an idea, an argument, a place or a human interaction that fixes it perfectly within a given time. Representations dissolve into and out of one another; old and new representations of the same objects may coexist; new assertions do not erase the traces of older ones. As an archivist it's my job to make sure that we don't only try to preserve records of specific events, but that we also try to preserve records of perception, commentary, and documentation. Often the changing character of documentation is far more interesting than what it documents.

While I do not believe that archival codes of ethics can anticipate every controversy, I think it would be an ethical violation simply to replace an old document with a new one, or delete something from public memory simply because its obsolescence was preordained. That would be anti-archiving.

I'd end these very preliminary thoughts by speculating that disposability is in itself something worth documenting and preserving. Why is this document considered disposable while another is not? What is the life of documents? Do some time-out after a specific interval while others endure? Professional records managers make retention schedules for certain kinds of records. Invoices might be kept for five years, while personnel records might last ten. Certain records might be kept indefinitely, which is to say forever. The scale between five years and forever is so hard to concretize as to be meaningless, but the decision to situate a document along the scale tells us much about what we value (and don't value) in a given period.

Mark also asked himself whether collecting is a kind of fetishism based on nostalgia or if it really has a historical value. Where do we draw the line?

While I acknowledge that nostalgia is authentically experienced by most of us, I do not believe that nostalgia functions as an authentic social force. I will renounce this statement when quantum physics can finally confirm that there are an infinite number of parallel and concurrent universes that can differ very slightly and that sometimes the human mind perceives 'leakage' from past to present and vice versa.

Nostalgic feelings present in most people have been appropriated by commercial and authoritarian forces seeking to deprive us of active agency in the present. Discourses of loss, melancholia and victimhood pervade First World cultures, and nostalgia quite often works to dissociate us from the challenges and excitements of the present day. I would rather reclaim history from nostalgia rather than extract nostalgia from history.

I'm very much attracted to the idea of using archival materials to perform historical interventions, by which I mean using the past to inform the present so

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

as to affect the future. Archives, libraries, museums and other cultural entities that actively push their collections out into a shared public sphere are capable of intervening in the eternal spectacle of the present and interrupting its apparent seamlessness. This is what I've tried to do with our online archives and what Megan and I have tried to do with our open physical library.

Nostalgia tends to ask questions for which we already know the answers; historical intervention asks questions for which there may be no easy answers.

As a whole, your collection currently contains over 10% of the total production of ephemeral films between 1927 and 1987, and it may be the most complete and varied collection in existence of films from these poorly preserved genres. What happened to the rest?

If you accept my extremely general figures, perhaps 400,000 advertising, educational, industrial and sponsored films were made during this period. Over time we collected materials representing approximately 60,000 titles. This means that we collected about 15% of the total production. The rest: perhaps 20% more, especially educational films, was still in active distribution while we were collecting; perhaps another 10 or 20% resided in other archives or collections. Again, these are extremely general estimates, but I think it's possible to say that somewhere around 50% of the total production has been lost or gone astray. By 'gone astray' I mean that it may still exist, but in such remote or uncharacteristic places that it will never find its way into archives or formal collections.

Film was scrapped, junked, dumped off barges into the ocean, burned, sawed into pieces so that it could not be reused, chemically processed to remove silver, and so on. I have said that the U.S. was the most media-rich nation in history. This affluence caused us to look upon films (especially low-class ephemeral films) as disposable.

Aside from these main lines of work, does your collection have any limits (chronological, geographical, format-wise…)? Why (or why not?)

During the period I actively collected film on a very large scale (1982–2003), I attempted to collect everything within my chosen genres. The only exception was video; I only collected on film. Collecting video is a difficult pursuit because of the fragility of videotape and the obsolescence of formats and playback equipment. If you collect video, you need to also commit to collecting equipment and keeping the equipment in good repair, and you need to be ready to reformat and migrate your collection at regular intervals. This is a similar problem to preserving digital media, which is another thing I'm trying not to have to do.

Our primary collection was acquired by Library of Congress in 2002–03, and we made two other large donations after that time. I now collect much more selectively – my main interests are industrial and sponsored films of special merit, and of course, home movies (see below).

Collecting is about overcoming various difficulties: how do you deal with the lack of information, price speculation and lack of copies? Are there any other difficulties worth mentioning? Is this what makes collecting film particularly interesting from your point of view?

You can never be a completist with ephemeral films, because you can never know every film that was ever produced nor everything about the films of whose existence you know. Yes, you can search for specific films and the work of specific production companies: I made a list in 1982 of over a thousand films I wanted to find and ultimately found most of them.

I don't so much think of difficulties, I think of opportunities. The amazing thing is how often you can be surprised by what you find. I think there are still many thousands of surprising films that have not yet surfaced.

Actually, I recognize one difficulty. Archival work seems genteel and rarefied, but archival film work is actually a blue-collar, highly physical occupation. Film elements are big and heavy, cans rust, and collections can run into hundreds of tons. I routinely move truckloads of material around the country. If you collect on a mass level, you become a materials handler on a grand scale.

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

Where can these films be found? Are they easy to access? How have things changed since you started collecting these materials in 1982?

When I first started collecting I acquired films from schools, colleges and libraries, each of which typically maintained audiovisual collections. In the early eighties film was giving way to video, and institutions were trying to figure out what to do with their 16 mm collections. I came around at a time when I could help them solve this problem. Some of the older collections, especially those that had been assembled by imaginative and courageous audiovisual librarians, contained very interesting and often unique material. There are fewer of these collections today; most audiovisual collections that turn up contain variations on the same material.

In my next phase I made friends with people who had worked at production companies that had gone out of business, and I contacted production companies that were either extinct or going in that direction. This turned up a tremendous amount of very interesting material, including master and preprint film elements. Later I began to collect material from film laboratories that had gone out of business. Labs often store printing elements and masters for their customers long after their customers have died or gone out of business, and many labs were storing tens of thousands of cans. I solved problems for them as well. By the time our collection went to Library of Congress, it contained film from well over 100 different sources.

Today, most of the material I collect tends to come to me because people know what I do, but I still occasionally scout out materials.

Most collectors talk about the thrill of the hunt, and how once the desired object is acquired it loses part of its interest. Would your case be similar?

For me, things begin to get interesting when a film comes in. I imagine how I want to use it and how others will use it, and I contemplate its repurposing in all sorts of ways. While I do enjoy hunter-gatherer activity, it's the use of the material and its dissemination to the public that really turns me on. Simple possession is far less interesting than use. I think my inability to really enjoy possessing archival material on a private level means that I'm a poor collector.

Your collection in numbers: approximately how many films did you own? In a collection like yours, is price an issue or is it more about how to deal with quantity?

Adding up the entirety of the collection that is now owned by the Library of Congress, it totaled approximately 60,000 titles plus some 30,000 cans of unedited footage, outtakes and miscellaneous material. Together these comprised approximately 200,000 cans of film.

Currently, the archive consists of approximately 3,000 cans of ephemeral film and almost 5,000 cans of home movies. We have approximately 4,500 items mastered on videotape or digitally, and some 2,100 items are online at Internet Archive for free downloading and reuse. We are beginning a new project to digitize all of our videotapes and expect that the online collection will grow to over 4,000 items within a year.

I can't avoid asking, what is your most valuable film? Is it possible to choose a personal favorite?

This is a very difficult question, one that's frequently asked of me. I resist answering as often as I can. But let me try. I cannot speak of value, just mention a few that I think are important. These are not in any special order.

Long Distance (Audio Productions for Bell System, 1941)
A Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire (Miles Brothers, 1906)
Booked for Safekeeping (George Stoney for Louisiana Association for Mental Health, 1960)
Valley Town (Willard Van Dyke for Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 1940)
Tuesday in November (John Houseman for U.S. Information Agency, 1945)
Conquer by the Clock (Slavko Vorkapich for RKO-Pathé, 1943)

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

Age 13 (Arthur Swerdloff for Sid Davis Productions, 1955)
Ivan Besse Home Movies, Britton, South Dakota (1938–39)
Master Hands (Jam Handy Organization for Chevrolet Motor Company, 1936)
Once Upon a Honeymoon (Jerry Fairbanks Productions for Bell System, 1956)

Do you digitize everything? Once digitized, does the original still have the same value for you? Do you use a method to classify the material?

We are now attempting to digitize everything in our collection, but it's not completely clear that we'll be able to achieve that goal. Now that the cost of digitization is dropping (aided by the development of cheaper film scanners), we will at least try.

In my view, digitization increases the value of the original material, as it offers an opportunity to circulate 'an image of the film' very widely. Cultural value is created through circulation, and the more a film circulates, the more it takes root in the culture; people link into the film and out of it, use it in the making of new works, reference it in writing and conversation. So while the film original may not itself leave the vault, it represents the master copy of an entity that becomes more and more valuable as it propagates through the culture. Please note that I am not talking about market value, as it's my contention that we need to develop a different scale of value by which to measure the worth of archival material.

As far as classification is concerned, I'm not a big classifier. I have a database of all of our material that is transferred to video and/or digitized, which contains freetext descriptions and certain fields describing the film. Albert Steg, working with The Center for Home Movies, has developed a first draft of a list of 'home movie tropes,' common elements like *Baby in the Backyard* or *Mugging for the Camera*, that turn up in many home movies, and I think we may employ a similar taxonomic scheme to help make sense of our home movie collection.

I'm particularly intrigued by the variety of formats that one can find in your collection. How do you reproduce/digitize the older formats?

Fewer and fewer people are aware of the diversity of film formats that have come and gone since the eighties. Our collection was primarily 16 mm, but we had several million feet of 35 mm and significant home movie holdings in 8 mm and Super 8. There were also bits and pieces of 9.5 mm and 28 mm. Each format has a particular 'look and feel' of its own. I rarely focused much on standard 8 mm for the first 20 years I collected, but have recently come to love its intimate character, its ubiquity (people shot 8 mm in all places, situations and circumstances) and its informality. There's a tremendous amount of black-and-white 8 mm from the late thirties and early forties whose visual quality is excellent. One day I'll make a movie about the American city in the years before World War II.

Specialized labs and transfer houses make it possible to transfer and digitize almost any film gauge, though their services are sometimes quite expensive.

Has your collection been accessible to the public since the very beginning? When did you realize the material could be used?

My feelings about archival access and my practical work to make archives accessible have changed a great deal over time. I began collecting somnambulistically because I was interested in the material, but I had little sense why I was collecting. A year after I started a friend who worked in television approached me and asked to use some of my material on the air, and was ready to pay for this. This made me realize that I could fund the acquisition of more material through the sale of stock footage. I did this for several years and made some money, which allowed me to rent more trucks and move more material to my little office in New York, but I wasn't particularly interested in business for its own sake.

In 1986 friends introduced me to Bob Stein, co-founder of The Voyager Company, a pioneering multimedia publisher. Voyager produced laserdiscs with additional soundtracks and supplementary material, which we now take for

[Rick Prelinger *Panorama Ephemera*, 2004,
http://www.archive.org/details/panorama_ephemera2004]

granted with DVDs but which had never before been done. Bob and I decided to make some videodiscs of material from my archives, and it was the process of working with Bob that helped me realize the greater significance of what I was doing. I realized that my project was really the practice of vernacular history in the public sphere, and began to think in terms of historical intervention. This was a real eye-opener. In the early nineties, it became possible to release movies on CD-ROM, and I decided to make the movie files downloadable and accessible, rather than hiding them deep within an application. My *Our Secret Century* series, which was twelve CD-ROMs containing 100 films plus contextual material, was designed to be a desktop archives that anyone could use and repurpose as they pleased.

While selling stock footage, I was often asked to supply footage for free to artists, activists, independent filmmakers and community projects. I almost always said yes, except in cases where it seemed clear that the askers were dishonestly claiming they did not have a budget to pay for material. This meant that I spent a lot of time working for free, as it costs just as much to help someone for free as it does to sell them material. I explored different alternatives for making this a little easier, such as alliances with local universities, but nothing really worked out.

But as a New Yorker and commercial media professional, I think I still believed that information wanted to be expensive. My state of mind didn't change until I moved to San Francisco in early 1999 and met Brewster Kahle, founder of Internet Archive. Within the first twenty seconds of our first telephone conversation he asked me whether I wanted to put my archives online for free. I didn't know how to respond to that question, and stuttered through some kind of answer, but within a month or so the contrarian in me started to believe that he might be right. Over the next year we figured out how to transfer and digitize film cheaply, and at the end of 2000 we put our first several hundred films online. As I've said earlier, this was a life-changing experience, and I am now convinced that this not only helps people who would otherwise not be able to work with archival material, but helps to assure the long-term survival of the archives themselves.

I now believe that archives have to work even harder to open up access to their collections; this is really the mandate of our times.

Is all the material you collect in the public domain or 'out of control'? Can you reflect on the 'out of control' concept?

About 65% of our (pre-2003) collection was in the public domain. I think a higher percentage of our current ephemeral film collection is out of copyright, as I have tried hard not to collect in-copyright material.

I never understood this concept of 'out of control.' First, copyright status has never prevented duplication and unpaid usage. The existence of a valid copyright simply offers a judicial remedy for unauthorized usage, if copyright holders seek to pursue it. Second, it seemed to me that if archivists or other custodians of content were so worried about 'unauthorized' or autonomous duplication of materials in their collection, they had already lost control of it. Since ubiquity enhanced the value of material, it seemed logical to distribute it as widely as possible. It's true, of course, that scarcity can serve to generate income, but enclosing material so as to artificially create scarcity makes little sense for material which has very little consumer market, like ephemeral films.

Beyond that, I'm quite suspicious of any notion of 'control' over cultural material. Who has the right to control culture and its expression? Control (whatever that may mean) seems like an inorganic overlay over processes that are inherently open and distributive. You can dam a river and regulate its flow, but dams don't last forever.

Who is interested in that type of material? I know for a fact that many musicians have used it as a source. Can you share some examples/experiences along these lines?

Our users come from every sector of mediamaking. Usage that financially supports the archives (and its custodians) comes primarily from the commercial media sector, who access our collection through our stock footage representative, Getty Images. The profile of users in this category keeps changing, and includes feature-film makers, television producers, makers of TV commercials, interactive

Valley Town (Willard Van Dyke for Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, 1940)
http://www.archive.org/details/TripDown1905]

designers, corporate in-house producers, theatrical and concert designers, etc. Our footage has appeared in feature films like *Natural Born Killers* and *Bowling for Columbine,* and countless documentaries. A forthcoming feature film, *Poussières d'Amerique (Dusts of America),* directed by the French filmmaker Arnaud des Pallières, is a highly original work made completely from footage in our collection.

Beyond that, our archives is often the first source of material for independent and experimental media makers, musicians and VJs. Vicki Bennett (People Like Us) has used our footage extensively in her work, and I've seen clips in the work of DJ Spooky and Christian Marclay.

How has the internet revolution changed your field? Ephemeral films are no longer a rarity and they are now also widely available and shared.

We have moved from a model of scarcity to a model of plenty, to use Lawrence Lessig's formulation. If we count downloads at archive.org and estimate the many versions of our films existing at other websites, we think our films have been downloaded or viewed perhaps as many as 60 or 70 million times. Just one film of ours, *A Trip Down Market Street Before the Fire* (1906), appears to have been downloaded or viewed at archive.org at least 80,000 times, and derivative versions from the archive.org copies that appear on YouTube have been viewed over 3 million times. There's no comparison between these kinds of statistics and the number of 'access events' that occur at conventional moving image archives. So abundance is now a fact.

I find it fascinating how archival material and, by extension, consciousness of archival practice has penetrated sectors of the public who previously knew nothing about it. I also find the number and breadth of derivative works quite astonishing. Besides the appropriation-centered works we'd expect, ephemeral films are also used in teaching (and by homeschoolers), by churches and religious groups, by the corporations that originally commissioned them, and in museums. I constantly encounter material from our archives in unexpected places and am thrilled that this material appears without our permission. You might say that our films have become part of the content infrastructure of the Web. The basic material is available for free, and money changes hands on the service layer.

I should take a moment to explain our business model, which resembles what some people are now calling 'freemium.' I had no idea how this would work before I started to engage in it, and I've been learning as I go along. In essence we furnish our online material for free under the Creative Commons Public Domain license. If someone wishes higher-quality material, we charge them for it. If a producer whose work is going to rise above a certain threshold of visibility or liability needs a written agreement that contains our indemnification, we also charge for that. What we've evolved is a 'two-tier' system in which certain kinds of usage are free and others carry a bill. In general it has worked quite well, though there is always friction between the two poles of the model. Many people don't understand (or claim not to understand) why they have to pay us for the use of public domain material – they don't understand that they're not paying for a copyright license, but rather paying us for our service in providing the material or for our indemnification, which means that we agree to pay their legal fees if there are problems with the copyright to the material.

In relation to these same ideas, do you think the society we live in is overdocumented?

I find it difficult to engage with the idea of overdocumentation. I think our society generates documentation as a byproduct of its normal activity, and documentation increases with complexity. There's no question that more data (and especially more media) is being created than our successors will ever be able to process and thoughtfully contextualize, but a lot of data will simply wither away. Since we can only speculate what the future will consider important, I think all we can do is observe the ecological behavior and characteristics of information and from that process begin to derive strategies for dealing with it.

Do you think that the availability of downloadable media since the introduction of high-speed broadband in the late nineties has led to a shift in cultural identity or changed our understanding of other cultures?

[*Booked for Safekeeping* (George Stoney for Louisiana Association for Mental Health, 1960), http://www.archive.org/details/Bookedfo1960]

To the extent that we view and remix materials from many cultures and nations, I suppose the prospect of hybrid cultural identities is slightly more present. But I'm really not sure whether our community relationships affect our core identities, no matter how much physical territory they may span or how much cultural difference they may blur. Rather, I think that most (though not, of course, all) prime media consumers and users tend to naturalize what they see and hear into a framework.

You've spoken of the creative re-use of previously existing media as being a kind of folk art. Do you have any thoughts on what is 'next', so to speak? Given that in some sense we are only beginning to make use of high-speed access to information, do you have any predictions on how folk art may develop with this new-found access?

Lately I've been credited with this statement, but it's actually my paraphrase of Craig Baldwin's insight that found footage filmmaking is a new iteration of folk art.

I think we are on the verge of a new upheaval in the media world, which will be based on immersivity. Giant screens, 3-D visualization, haptic feedback and other technologies will be combined to construct media environments that will be denser and more distracting than we've ever experienced. Gamers are already there; moviegoers will follow. Not everyone will choose to engage with these kinds of experiences, especially older people, but I feel certain that movies and premium television will shift towards increased immersivity so as to develop properties they can distribute at higher prices. One could argue that the nationwide U.S. HD screenings of the Metropolitan Opera are a small step in that direction.

As immersive media evolves and becomes a more common experience, I think low-fi media collages and legacy uses of archival material will drift back towards the margins of media culture. The connoisseurs of low-fi media will continue to make it, collect it and care for it, and people seeking an escape from mainstream immersivity will seek out low-fi experiences, but I think it will bear the same relationship to commercial media culture as 8-track tapeheads or Super 8 filmmakers do now, which is to say that it will be another rich subculture almost invisible to the masses.

But none of this precludes the development of folk culture within emerging media. Perhaps in 2025 we'll be able to don our helmets and find ourselves at a 1990s microcinema watching a found-footage film, or at an early 2000s People Like Us live set. New media always finds ways to simulate the look and feel of its predecessors.

You mentioned recently that you were a little worried that the culture of remix could have a negative side in that it could be swept aside as a trend (i.e. *Everything is a remix*), and that archives could be seen as something from the past again rather than being recognized as relevant to our development. Are there any steps that archivists and creatives could take to deal with this possible threat?

This is a pertinent question right now as remix culture becomes a mainstream practice, or at the very least a practice that is easily accommodated within mainstream cultures. In my opinion, recycling is at risk right now. Everyone from avant-gardists to advertisers engages in appropriation, and there's often little to distinguish one kind of borrowing from another. What we used to think of as a leading avant-garde (and subversive) practice is devolving into mere style, into a kind of anti-glossiness that sells pop stars and blue jeans. The great appropriated works are disappearing into a haze of quotidian quotation.

Are there ways to redeem recycling? For one thing, we could aim towards keeping alive a genuine critique of the mechanics of representation, not simply ritual deconstruction. Not another loopy piece that uses the tactic of making the familiar strange simply through repetition. Not simply aggressively edited machine-gun-style collages of mainstream news footage. Not 'easy-viewing' collages that derive all their power from the cultural associations of the original material, rather than the value we ourselves add through manipulation.

We could come to terms with the question of whether we remix to make art, or make art to remix. In other words, is appropriation/recontextualization a strategic

[*Master Hands* (Jam Handy Organization for Chevrolet Motor Company, 1936),
http://www.archive.org/details/MasterHa1936]

approach, or is it an end in itself? Do we simply recycle because it's fun to work with preexisting materials? There's nothing wrong with that, but it's not necessarily a subversive practice. Sometimes we find justification for remixing in media literacy. But some have critiqued media literacy for turning potential media critics into fans of media. Those of us who edit video know what this means, because editors are the ultimate cinephiles – we have a deeply emotional, almost erotic relationship with the material we edit, and this fetishism is on display to our viewers.

I think there are also open questions regarding aleatoricism, the role that chance and accident plays in remix and appropriation. I see a lot of our footage, and found footage generally, used in contexts that are primarily ambient or experiential. By this I mean unstructured, aleatory, chance-based sound/image/performance pieces, such scores that are written to accompany films without first looking at the films. This work tends to be about creating experiences that aren't very organized or rigorous, even though they might be profound. Again, nothing wrong with this approach, but it is growing extremely common. Chance is a great strategy, but it's no longer chance when it's routine.

So I don't at all mean to criticize experimentation, but I think we need to experiment harder, to ask more of ourselves rather than asking more of our software. And, while this is really hard when working with appropriated media, I'd suggest that we stop trying so hard to criticize existing media forms and instead think about what future forms might look like. It's just fine with me if we let existing media forms die of their own accord. In other words, let's redeem recycling from a reactive mode and move it into a formative mode. If recycling continues to be more reactive than formative, I worry about its future.

What are you working on right now? Will you be making any more feature films from your own collection or those of others?

I spend quite a lot of time with our home movie collection, which continues to grow in many exciting directions. This year we'll be digitizing many of them and creating a large online dataset of home movies that will be available for downloading, reuse and computational research and analysis.

This fall, I'll also produce my sixth *Lost Landscapes* compilation for San Francisco and my second for Detroit. These feature-length pieces pull together historical footage that generally hasn't been seen in many years, and encourage audiences to consider past and future in relationship with one another. I present them live before large groups, and ask people to comment and ask questions freely during the screening. Unlike most 'live cinema' events, this is not a rehearsed performance, but an interaction that plays out differently every time.

I'm also starting work on another feature film on movement and travel in America, which will largely (but not completely) use archival material.

As well as a performance space, the internet also seems to be an archive in progress. Some curated archive sites and blogs have been controversial or found themselves in trouble for sharing works that may be out of print, but not out of copyright. Do you think that these examples are taking us to the brink of some kind of enlightened shift in our attitude to ownership and sharing? Or do you think that it is only natural that such battles take place over ownership?

I agree that the time has come for battles over ownership and control, but it's an evolutionary rather than revolutionary situation. Existing distribution systems are based on scarcity, friction and no longer interoperate well with peoples' practice and expectations. Naturally new systems will grow to replace them, but I don't know whether they'll look like UbuWeb. While the legacy property-ownership model may not scale well as we move into a more mature internet age, I wouldn't necessarily expect rights holders to roll over and die. Capitalism has a sometimes uncanny way of reinventing itself, and I suspect we're going to see some interesting twists and turns in the so-called 'IP wars.' All of that said, we're raising generations of younger makers and cultural consumers who have grown up with free and low-cost access to culture, and it may be hard for cultural proprietors to turn that around.

[Rick Prelinger]

You started collecting in an age when archives were still largely tied to the stability of physical copies. Much of your daily work now involves digitizing raw materials and choosing which ones warrant inclusion for online access. Clearly the originals still exist somewhere, but for your audiences the nature of your archive changed once it went online. Did you notice any change in your relationship to your archive when it dematerialized?

Making our films available online was a life-changing experience. We suddenly acquired an army of collaborators around the world, many of whom I've never met and will never meet, but some of whom I've been privileged to meet and work with. I'd had a close relationship with the collection and knew many of the films extremely well, and it was a bit uncanny to hear from other people who worked closely with the films and got to know them as well or even better than I did.

I think the most dramatic change in my relationship to the archives was that I began to think of it as a common resource of which I was simply the custodian rather than the master. The sense of near-infinite possibility one often feels when in contact with an accessible collection was enhanced for me because I realized that a potentially unlimited number of people were going to use it for their working material. I looked forward to putting material online, and I evaluated new acquisitions by the use I imagined others would make of them. I felt networked in a completely new way and looked forward to hearing what others were doing with the archives.

And I also began to take a closer look at digitization and what it means for the culture and for the original materials that are digitized. As the very public debate and contention over the Google Books digitization project reveals, the process can be controversial. I began to realize we needed to develop ways of assessing the effects of digitization, and a few years ago suggested that we take a leaf from the environmental movement and prepare 'digitization impact statements,' similar to the environmental impact statements we have in the United States, for contemplated digitization projects. These statements would evaluate what effects digitization would have on the original collections and on the culture. Would the original materials be retained after scanning? Who would have access to the digital files? How would the distribution of the digital surrogates affect access to the original materials? At what quality level would the materials be digitized? And so on. Right now we let these events happen without much oversight or evaluation.

The financial viability of many archives was dependent on the scarcity of the materials they collected. You've taken the opposite approach. Can you talk, in abstract terms, about any tensions or competition that have arisen from your open source business model?

In general, putting our archival films online for free has improved our stock footage sales to professionals who have reason to pay for using it. Certainly some people who might otherwise pay a usage fee are downloading material and using it, but that number is trivial compared to the number of users who would definitely have no access to the collection if it hadn't been free to use.

We have seen a large number of poor-quality DVDs using our films entering into the marketplace. I have no problem with this, as the public domain is the public domain and no one can tell anyone else what to do or not to do with public domain material, but I do object when these DVD 'publishers' use my name or my words to promote their product, and I let them know of my objections. The main thing is that many more people are able to see these films and work with them.

Some other companies that sell public domain stock footage have told me that they resent my putting materials online for free, as they claim the competition has hurt their business. I don't quite know what to make of this, as none of our libraries duplicate one another and nothing I've done prevents them from offering special services on top of the material itself, but I do know there's been some resentment. But, as I said earlier, the public domain is the public domain, and its peculiar character is to be owned by no one.

Recently you've taken a step beyond the curation of industrial or educational films intended for specific public audiences, and begun collecting home movies

[Rick Prelinger]

shot by private families from the thirties, forties and fifties. Some of these films have now been widely recognized to have a profound historical value, such as the Barstow family's *Disneyland Dream* from 1956. Have you noticed any changes in your approach when handling this material and considering it for inclusion in a public library?

Over the past several years my archival work has evolved to focus primarily on home movies. I've collected quite a number and will be working harder to put them online in late 2011 and 2012. Home movies interest me because they resist being reduced down to simple categories: as soon as you say, 'oh, that's another wedding or another birthday party film' you realize that they're capable of infinite variation, and it's the little, sometimes almost imperceptible differences that make these most ephemeral of films sing loudly. Home moviemakers were also present at many major events, and even when their films don't show known events, they're permeated with a feeling of place and time quite unlike what's present in other kinds of films.

The other attribute of home movies I find interesting is that they really problematize archival practice. You cannot catalog, arrange or make them accessible in quite the same way you can other films. And their populist character obliges the archivist to think differently about the kinds of uses that can be made of them and the kind of access to them we want to encourage. I think home movies point not only to the frontier of archival practice, but to the frontiers of the archives itself.

[deep breath]

02. Acknowledgements

03. Copyright note