

# Walt Whitman (1819-1892) Speaks?

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On March 26, 1892, Walt Whitman died in his cottage in Camden, NJ, leaving behind a substantial legacy of American poetry, including his well-known and frequently updated *Leaves of Grass*. But a recently discovered cassette recording opens up the possibility that he also left behind a more tangible memento - a wax cylinder containing his own voice, a heart-felt rendition of his 1888 addition, "America."

APM first heard of this discovery when a reporter for *The New York Times* called in an attempt to verify the voice. A long article by William Grimes then appeared on March 16, 1992, detailing the research efforts that he had made. One of the many problems was the absence of any contemporary reference to Whitman actually having made a record, despite detailed coverage of his last years in Horace Traubel's Diaries (*With Walt Whitman in Camden*). Other incunabular recordings, like Barnum, Sullivan, Stanley, Nightingale, etc., were frequently commented upon in the press or in memoirs. Grimes came to no firm conclusion himself, but with the luxury of time, APM has been able to gather enough additional material to solve this dilemma.

The cassette selection (found in a Texas college library) had apparently been taken from a radio program broadcast in the early 1950's, when Whitman's voice accompanied other poets, like Robert Frost and James Whitcomb Riley. With assistance from Sam Brylawski at the Library of Congress, we were able to identify the actual program from recently donated NBC archives - it was *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, and the exact date it was broadcast - Sunday, at 1pm (EDT), August 5, 1951. The narrator was Leon Pearson (brother of Drew Pearson) and the Whitman segment (described as a battered "Gramophone cylinder") was introduced as coming from the "remarkable Roscoe Haley collection in New York." Nothing further was indicated about this collector at that time or in the *Times* article.

Sometime in 1974, the program was re-released by the little known Center for Cassette Studies, 8110 Webb Avenue, North Hollywood, CA 91605. Copyright documentation was filed by Edna H. Edwards of 1100 Chantilly Road, Los Angeles, CA 90077. None of these sources could be located today.

We were able to determine, from micro-filmed telephone directories, that NYC's only

Roscoe Haley lived at 274 W. 19th Street for many years (since 1939); his last listing occurred in the 1981-82 Directory, and his first (trade) listing was in 1920 at 360 W. 19th (no telephone), where he was described as an "elevator starter". The last annual Death Index for NYC was published for 1982, so hoping we would get lucky, we consulted this volume, which did indeed indicate that one Roscoe Haley died (actually was found) on January 15, 1982. A trip to the Division of Vital Records was an introduction to the byways of bureaucracy, but we finally succeeded in getting his death certificate which revealed that he died at the age of 92, leaving no children, and one elderly sister. He had been born on Sept. 3, 1889, somewhere in Tennessee.

It was time for a visit to his former residence and luckily the Superintendent remembered him ("an elderly gentleman with gray hair and a limp, lived alone, never married"). When he died, his apartment was filled to overflowing with papers, books, and records. A neighbor remembered that some of the records had been sold to Joe Franklin, the host of a syndicated nostalgia show on radio and tv. When contacted, Joe remembered Roscoe well, had bought records from him while he was alive, but recalled him as somewhat eccentric ("beyond gay"); and he had not purchased any cylinders from him! All he could say was that the voice on the tape was definitely not Haley's.

A round-robin of calls to other collectors active during that period turned up two who had actually bought the remainder of his estate from his sister Wilma - David Goldenburg and Morton Savada. Dave bought only discs, he said, when approached by APM, but Morty did purchase a cylinder phonograph and about 40 cylinders along with other personality recordings. However, none of these could be located and he remembered nothing special being set aside as a Whitman recording. Savada did recall that Haley may have been an interviewer at the 1939 NY World's Fair, and that some of those acetates had survived, but were unlocated at this time.

More discussion followed and Sam at LC mentioned that there was a Whitman recording at Syracuse University. We quickly contacted Susan Stinson at their Belfer Labs and confirmed that they did indeed have the same recording, but on a 10" acetate disc, along

Feb. 14, 1889.

Sylvester Baxter, Esq.,  
Ledgewood Terrace, Murray St.,  
M a l d e n, Mass.

My Dear Sir:-

Mr. Edison has received your letter of 8th instant, in regard to obtaining a phonographic record of the poet Whitman. He is very much obliged for your suggestion, and will endeavor to carry it out.

Yours very truly,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. O. Tate'. The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat slanted style with a long, sweeping underline that curves back under the main body of the signature.

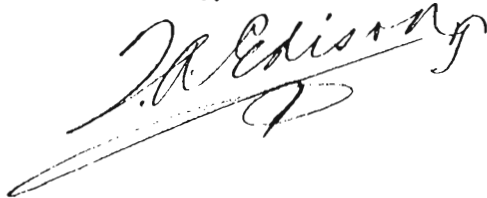
Private Secretary.

Jesse H. Lippincott, Esq.,  
North American Phonograph Co.,  
160 Broadway, N. Y. City.

My Dear Sir:-

In reference to the attached letter from Mr. Sylvester Baxter, do you wish to act upon this gentleman's suggestion, and obtain a phonogram from the poet Whitman?

Yours truly,

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. A. Edison'. The signature is written in a cursive, somewhat slanted style with a long, sweeping underline that curves back under the main body of the signature.

**A Valentine for Walt?** On Feb. 14, 1889, Edison's private secretary, A. O. Tate, wrote to Whitman's friend and booster, Sylvester Baxter, thanking him for the phonographic suggestion. The same day, signing Edison's name, he also wrote to the President of the North American Phonograph Co., J. H. Lippincott, asking for approval. However, despite these letters, there is no evidence that any records were actually made. (Courtesy ENHS)

with several other famous voices ("Twain," Tolstoi, etc.). The University had purchased its copy from the Bell Brothers Music Box Record Store (847 Sixth Ave., NYC) around 1963. Max Bell was no longer around, but Joseph had retired to Florida; unfortunately, when we located him in Ft. Lauderdale, he did not remember how he got the recording onto the acetate disc - he was familiar with cylinders, but was more accustomed to transferring 78s. He could not remember Roscoe Haley, but had been the producer of an LP record album entitled *The Voices of the Twentieth Century* (narrated by Henry Fonda); the Whitman selection, however, was not on it. Joe did offer to get us a recording of Oscar Wilde, "authenticated" by Wilde's son(!), but this line of research left us with doubts.

George Tselos at the Edison National Historic Site burrowed through their documents and found two letters indicating that a recording of Whitman was indeed contemplated on February 14, 1889; the letters were signed to Jesse Lippincott by A. O. Tate (for Edison). No documentation indicated however that the recordings were actually made.

A call to collector Richard Lenk prodded a faint memory of a possible *Hobbies Magazine* reference to the subject, but hours of browsing produced only one likely lead, a July 1971 article on the voice of Harriet Beecher Stowe, in which it was stated that the record belonged to an "eccentric retired elevator operator." This must have been Roscoe Haley. Since the curator of Yale's Historical Sound Recordings was mentioned, we contacted Richard Warren jr. Mr. Warren was able to locate some letter files from twenty-five years ago which indicated that Yale had briefly negotiated with Haley to obtain a number of historic voices, including Stowe, Whitman, Benj. Harrison, Grover Cleveland, etc. None of the cylinders themselves were produced and apparently Yale became skeptical; no purchases were made. What is most curious is that the "Whitman" selection was identified as a poem "about Lincoln"! The voice we were trying to identify was reciting a poem called *America*, which was indeed patriotic but made no mention of the President.

The exact contents of the tape recorded cylinder are as follows: *America/  
Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,  
All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young  
or old,  
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich,  
Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law  
and Love.*

The last line ends with the intonation of finality. But when this rendition is compared to the printed version of "America," there is a comma after *Love*, and it goes on like this:

*A grand, sane, towering, seated Mother,  
Chair'd in the adamant of Time.*

Thinking that there may have been an alternate (shorter) version of this little known poem, we contacted Whitman scholars at the University of Iowa (which celebrated his Centenary) and learned that the poem had always been presented in its entirety. Why the truncated version on the tape/cylinder?

APM took the tape to several sound experts, including the Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives, and they were unanimous that the recording contained too much bass response for a hundred-year-old recording, and the signal-to-noise ratio was much too high.

So what is APM's final opinion on this mysterious artifact? We believe that Edison did intend to record the poet's words in 1889, but that this record is not the result of that effort. The provenance of the cylinder (from the *Roscoe Haley Collection*) is very much against it, associated as it is with the voice of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and other legendary, unauthenticated recordings. Whitman was seriously ill toward the end of his life and generally confined to his wheelchair. His day-by-day diarist made no mention of a visit by recording experts, and many articles in local and national newspapers, although citing his fame, fail to note a phonograph in any way.

Most of the legitimate historic cylinders from the early period of sound were found in the West Orange basement of Edison assistant Walter H. Miller and re-discovered by G. Robert Vincent who worked for the Edison Co. in the late 1920's; they were then re-recorded with the technical help of Frank Capps between 1935-37. Considering Vincent's penchant for publicity and his later attitude toward the unauthentic voices of Twain, Debs, and McKinley, he certainly would have heralded a Whitman discovery. It is unmentioned in the recent dissertation-biography of Vincent, *Hello, Posterity*, by Douglas Collar.

Roscoe Haley's unwillingness to show anyone the actual cylinders in his truly "remarkable" collection and his constant stonewalling on their whereabouts, certainly argues against their validity. The LP record of *Hark the Years*, originally issued in 1951 (narrated by Fredric March and produced by Vincent), indicates that there was a perceived demand for America's recorded past. APM feels that Haley was all too ready to supply this need and that the supposed Walt Whitman recording is a fascinating fraud. □

*If any of our readers care to make their own evaluations, we would be glad to send a cassette copy of the "Whitman" recording upon receipt of \$10 in stamps to cover the cost of the cassette, transfer, and shipping. Simply add the item to our book list.*