“V-DISCs”

V-Disc 504A

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A Unique American National Resource

The Glenn Miller Archive (GMA) contains an essentially complete set of V-Disc Army and Navy releases, special releases, documentation, memoranda, session sheets, matrix catalogs and numerous original V-Disc test pressings. Several collections also contain unique V-Disc test pressings. The collection, research and correspondence of leading V-Disc historian, Richard Sherwood Sears is preserved by the GMA.

In 1940, a Morale Branch of the Army was created in Washington, D.C. The Morale Branch included two sections that contained the seeds that grew into two major morale-boosting units, the Armed Forces Radio Service (AFRS) and the V-Disc group. AFRS grew out of the Radio Section and the Recreation and Welfare Section spawned the V-Disc program. Until July 1942, when a recording ban was imposed by the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), the Section was distributing copies of current record releases to service personnel. The ban would last until November 1944 for RCA Victor and Columbia. Decca and Capitol settled with the AFM in September 1943. By April 1942, the offices of the Radio Section were established in New York and Los Angeles. The New York office was organized for program production. The Los Angeles office was designated as program and production headquarters. By June 1943, Los Angeles had supplanted New York as the primary production center. In May 1942, Thomas H. A. Lewis of the Young and Rubicam advertising agency was commissioned, and made head of the Radio Section. Lewis was headquartered in Los Angeles and had extensive industry contacts and influence. Thus, it was obvious that AFRS would concentrate its activities in Los Angeles. The New York Radio Section office was run by Edward Kirby, formerly of WSM, Nashville. Kirby’s production team launched programs such as “Command Performance”, in New York, which were later moved to Los Angeles.

Lt. (later Capt.) Robert Vincent was a technical officer in the Radio Section offices in New York. He was involved with the shipment of transcriptions overseas of the Radio Section’s radio programs and commercial programs, with the commercials edited out. Because of the AFM strike, after July 1942, phonograph records of up-to-date popular music were lagging in the packages that were being shipped out. In July 1943, Vincent went to the Pentagon to propose a special recording projects a means of providing currently popular and other music on records for overseas packages. Thus, the “V-Disc” project was approved. Vincent was transferred from the Radio Section to the Music Section to devote his full attention to the new recording program. He set up offices at 205 East 42nd Street in New York.
Vincent reached agreements with the AFM and AFRA (American Federation of Radio Artists) regarding the waiver of all fees and royalties for the services of musicians and copyright payments for the published music. In return for these concessions, the Army agreed that V-Discs would be for the use of military personnel only and no commercial exploitation would be made of the recordings. These agreements made it possible for the Army to afford the V-Disc program by focusing funds for processing and pressing records. Similar agreements were reached by AFRS regarding their radio programs. By October 1943, there was no connection between the V-Disc program and AFRS. V-Discs were neither recorded by or for AFRS. The V-Disc unit was located in New York and AFRS was located in Los Angeles.
Working for Vincent on his immediate staff were Tony Janak and Morty Palitz, formerly of Columbia records; Steve Sholes and Wally Heebner, formerly of RCA Victor, and, later, George T. Simon, formerly editor of Metronome Magazine (replacing Palitz). In March 1944, the team moved to 25 West 45th Street, New York. The Navy decided to join the project and assigned Lt. Edmond “Digi” DiGiannantonio as their representative. In July 1944, a V-Disc radio program, “For the Record”, was added and aired over the NBC flagship station WEAF. By October 1944, the Marine Corps also joined the V-Disc program and assigned Capt. Lee Kamern as their representative.

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Popular songwriter, Frank Loesser, was assigned to the Music Branch and worked with the V-Disc staff on various projects. Following the end of hostilities, Robert Vincent was promoted to Major and awarded the Legion of Merit for his work with the V-Disc program. M/Sgt. Tony Janak took over the program in October 1945. The V-Disc program continued on a reduced scale until it was phased out in May 1949, with its “FFF” release.

Source Materials

During the first months of the program, the small V-Disc staff had to use any material that they could find and expeditiously produce. As the V-Disc group was organized and fully staffed, it was able to procure unlimited material and became very selective. It is estimated that less than 20 percent of the material that the group had available and worked with was ever actually issued. There were eight primary sources for V-Discs: special recording sessions, concerts, recitals, radio broadcasts, broadcast dress rehearsals, radio transcriptions (both commercial and AFRS), film sound tracks and commercial records (both issued and unissued versions). Spoken introductions were included on many V-Discs to establish a more personal relationship between the artists and overseas listeners.

Special V-Disc sessions were recorded in the field. The most frequently used facilities were CBS Playhouse 2, CBS Playhouse 3 (the Ed Sullivan Theatre, from where today’s David Letterman program airs), CBS Playhouse 4 (which became the Studio 54 disco), Columbia Records, Liederkranz Hall, NBC, RCA Victor Records, the Vanderbilt Theatre (NBC) and the World Broadcasting System studios. World was owned by Decca records during the V-Disc period. Hollywood’s NBC and CBS studios were also used for V-Disc sessions.

Numerous radio programs were transmitted by direct line to NBC and CBS in New York for recording. The V-Disc program had access to radio transcription libraries. Many selections from 16-inch 33 1/3-rpm transcription discs can be found on V-Disc. Sources included AFRS, NBC, Thesarus, World, Langworth and Standard.
Recordings

V-Discs themselves were 12-inch 78-rpm records, which were recorded with a fixed number of lines or grooves per inch. For recording times of up to 4:30 minutes, 96 lines per inch were used. For up to 6:30 minutes, 136 lines per inch were squeezed onto the record. By comparison, 85 to 97 lines per inch were used for standard commercial 10-inch 78-rpm records. The maximum V-Disc playing time of 6:30 minutes compares to the maximum playing time of standard 10-inch 78-rpm records of 3:25 minutes and 12-inch 78-rpm records of 4:20 minutes. The V-Disc group safety recordings were single-sided 16-inch 33 1/3-rpm discs with a number of music tracks.

Production

Commercial 78-rpm recordings were made of shellac and were very fragile. Breakage of records sent overseas was a problem. Broken records meant delays. Shellac was in short supply. The main sources of shellac were the Malay Peninsula and French Indochina, which were occupied by the Japanese. Vinylite was therefore used during initial V-Disc production. It was a Union Carbide resin which had been used for radio transcriptions since the early 1930s. Vinylite records were flexible, and almost unbreakable. Unfortunately, Vinylite was also in short supply and prioritized for military use in electrical insulation, life rafts and so forth. A substitute was found in Formvar, a Canadian polyvinyl acetal resin that was developed by a subsidiary of Monsanto Chemical Company. Most of the V-Discs pressed between 1943 and 1946 were produced at the RCA Victor Camden, New Jersey plant.

Distribution

Records produced at RCA Victor in Camden, New Jersey and at other locations were shipped and collated at Camden, assembled into complete releases and packed in boxes. The cardboard boxes were designed for safe overseas shipment without breakage or damage. The boxes were coated with wax and waterproof glues, shockproof and impervious to varying climatic conditions. One hundred Duotone or Microphonic steel needles were enclosed in each box with a letter from Capt. Vincent inviting requests and comments. The first V-Discs were shipped from Camden on October 1, 1943. This initial “A” release consisted of 1,780 boxes of thirty records each (V-Discs 1-30) for a total of 53,400 records.
The boxes went to eight POEs (Ports of Embarkation) operated by the Army for shipment overseas. The POES were New York (Brooklyn), Boston, Newport News, Charleston, New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. A major portion of the boxes went through Brooklyn. From the POEs, the boxes went to the headquarters of theatres of operation in Alaska, Iceland, England, Italy, Sicily, Africa, the Persian Gulf, India, China, Guadalcanal and Australia. From the theatre headquarters, the boxes were distributed to military units. V-Discs were also distributed on a limited basis to bases in the United States. Shipments were reduced to 20 records per box beginning with the “E” release in February 1944 (V-Discs 121-140).

Production trebled in 1944 because of demand from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, OWI (Office of War Information) and OIAA (Office of Inter-American Affairs). By January 1945, 3,000 V-Discs were being produced and distributed each month. By September 1945, total production reached four and one half million records. By the end of the program, it is estimated that more than eight million V-Discs were distributed.

Acknowledgments

The GMA Richard Sherwood Sears Collection