

FEELER

Rediscovered Radio: WYSO's Lost Tapes

by Jocelyn Robinson

Jocelyn Robinson: I'm Jocelyn Robinson. Mistakes come in all shapes and sizes. Some are glaring and obvious, like a surgeon amputating the wrong limb. And others, as we will see in this tale of benign neglect, are not so obvious. They are seemingly minor, but they are mistakes, nonetheless. Sometimes, that's a good thing. In the case of some old reel to reel tapes from a little college radio station, neglect proved to be a saving grace. This is a story about how abandonment and inattention yielded a legacy that helped restore a community touchstone.

[ARCHIVAL TAPE OF WYSO'S FIRST BROADCAST]

Jocelyn Robinson: That's a recording of WYSO's very first broadcast, back in 1958. When it went on the air that February, student founders Hal Roeth and Ed Richard promised a broadcast service by and not just for Antioch students. In their first program guide, they wrote: "We cannot expect to sit up here in our 'ivory tower' and put programs on the air without considering the needs and desires of our audience. We hope you will enjoy this, our first schedule. What it will be in the months to come is up to you. Let us know how we can make this a community radio station." At only 10 watts, the signal didn't go far; it barely made it across campus. But that would change; WYSO would morph from a college station into so much more. Over the past six-plus decades, student programmers have been joined by community volunteers and professional staff. The airwaves have been filled with a diverse mix of music, news, information, and local voices, often with national and even global perspectives. Today, WYSO operates at 50,000 watts and has a potential listenership of over two million people in Southwest Ohio. It's what we've come to think of as public radio, which has a long tradition in the US. But college radio came first.

Jennifer Waits: So yeah, that history goes back to the 1920s, and definitions get really muddled, so you know, what is public radio, what is college radio, what is community radio? If you ask different people, you might get different answers.

Jocelyn Robinson: Radio historian Jennifer Waits is one of the cofounders of *Radio Survivor*, a podcast that covers the culture of radio. She's also a member of a Library of Congress project called the Radio Preservation Task Force.

Jennifer Waits: So, so some folks might say that public radio really began with those early years, at the same time that I'm saying college radio began. And other people might say that public radio began when you started to see these networks of stations doing public oriented broadcasting, this, you know, officially sanctioned, type of radio that people think about with National Public Radio, and they're getting funding from listeners largely, uh, but also from some foundations. And then there's the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in the United States, which, uh, many public radio stations are also getting funding from. College radio stations are often funded by their universities or colleges. And then by listener donations, sometimes by student fees. I'll contrast that with community radio stations, that that might be run by a nonprofit or a community group and, and have volunteers working at the stations and are mainly getting their funding from listener donations and possibly from grants.

Jocelyn Robinson: So Antioch College's radio station would become a hybrid of all three. Antioch itself, as the Federal Communications Commission, or FCC licensee, has had a complex and fraught history, but that's another story. Suffice it to say that as a small liberal arts institution it had a progressive viewpoint that it shared with the immediate community of Yellow Springs, Ohio. And in the 1960s and 70s, the times they were a-changin'. The civil rights movement, and later, the anti-war movement, Black nationalism, and the women's movement swept over the nation and the Antioch campus. In its early years, WYSO produced programming during some of the most transformative periods of social and political change in the 20th Century. Now, radio is by nature ephemeral. Radio waves go out into the ether unless captured on a recording medium, and before the digital age, that medium was usually magnetic tape. Magnetic tape is expensive, bulky to store, and it deteriorates over time. You need special equipment to play it back. When radio stations move or change hands, old tapes are often the first thing to be thrown out. Today, digital recordings are cheap and easy to make, though their sheer numbers create different preservation problems. But in the past, few radio stations invested much time or their precious resources in recording and preserving the programming that went out over the airwaves. Except WYSO did. The students and community volunteers somehow knew they were documenting an extraordinary time. They made reel-to-reel recordings from the late 1950s through at least the early 80s. Thousands of them. Here's a recording from those early years. It's a student reporter with a story on civil rights protests that took place in Yellow Springs in 1964.

[ARCHIVAL TAPE OF CIVIL RIGHTS ERA NEWS REPORT]

Jocelyn Robinson: This transformational time was volatile. A student strike in 1973 rocked the college, and from that point forward dwindling enrollment and financial problems kept the school — and its radio station — on the brink. To survive, the college station became even more community oriented, and less of campus service. More and more volunteers shared airtime with the students, eventually becoming the bulk of the programmers. With only modest support from the government, channeled through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the CPB, the non-commercial radio model necessitates that individual stations fundraise from listeners, as Jennifer Waits mentioned. Since they are unable to use commercial advertising to support their operations, the membership drive was born. The WYSO marathon was an on-air appeal to encourage subscriptions from the community. These fund drives could get a little zany — but were necessary to keep the station on the air.

[ARCHIVAL TAPE OF WYSO MARATHON FUND DRIVE]

Jocelyn Robinson: Back when that tape was recorded in 1974, \$8,000 went a long way to support WYSO's eclectic music shows. Jazz, blues, and R&B predominated, but there was folk music, women's music, Celtic music, gospel, and at one point, a show featuring traditional Indian ragas that could be

heard right after the polka show. Every morning began with bluegrass. And the news and public information programming connected listeners with events here and abroad. Many of these programs were recorded on the reel-to-reels, like this live bluegrass concert featuring the Hot Mud Family, a local band with a national reputation:

[ARCHIVAL TAPE OF LIVE BLUEGRASS CONCERT]

Jocelyn Robinson: But by about the early 80s, a new approach to radio was taking hold. With the emergence of National Public Radio ten years before, a new business model developed that diverged from quirky, local fund drives. Selling underwriting wasn't exactly selling advertising, but it required a more business-like approach, with account managers soliciting sponsorship of programs. Some managers felt the radio station's sound needed to be more corporate and homogenous, more attractive to businesses that would pay to be mentioned during the daily NPR news magazines, *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. Here again is Jennifer Waits.

Jennifer Waits: There's an interesting tension at, at some of these stations that maybe began as student-oriented college radio stations and then grew and were really serving their community. And then as you grow, there can be debates about who we are as a station, who is our audience? What kind of programming are we airing? I see this with stations that are sort of a hybrid of community and public, where they, they may have a lot of locally produced content by local volunteers. But they also may have on their programming schedule, some syndicated programming, and, and so in airing this combination of content, there can be tension, I think, between people at a station and between listeners. Yeah, I think what was going on at WYSO is, is very representative of, of tensions that continue today.

Jocelyn Robinson: Sometimes, that tension was palpable. WYSO struggled along with Antioch College for years. Over time, the college had been absorbed into a larger university system with sites all over the U.S., and it remained under-enrolled and under-resourced. While the station had a loyal audience, it didn't generate enough funds for it to operate in the black. Management determined that the only way to make more money was to expand its reach; more listeners would equal more funds raised. So in the early 90s there was a drive to increase the broadcast footprint. The signal grew to 30,000 watts, but the transition was rocky. The station was moved out of the student union and into the basement of a former research lab across campus. These new digs were pretty funky, and just keeping WYSO on the air became the priority. Vick Mickunas came to the station in 1993 as a volunteer music host, and the following year he was made a paid staff member becoming the music director. Today he's an independent producer. He was there during those difficult days and remembers the contents of the closet down the hall from his office.

Vick Mickunas: And it was just nothing but shelves of reel to reel tapes in boxes. That wing did not have real good climate control. And there was none in that closet. But that's where they were. And I went through there and I looked at the tapes and I was just amazed. There are all kinds of musical performances, speeches, and there was all kinds of stuff. I knew this was absolutely precious material the second I saw it. I knew we couldn't do anything with these tapes, but there was talk about let's get rid of them. And as we went through various station managements, they were moved down to just kind of a, a junk collection room down on, on the basement floor.

Jocelyn Robinson: The tensions between growth and keeping the station on air continued, and a new manager was hired to guide WYSO toward that supposed public radio ideal.

Vick Mickunas: By about 1998, I stopped talking about the tapes because at that point I just really didn't want to draw attention to them because I felt this was a period for the next five years when they were very endangered and I didn't want to bring attention to them 'cause I was afraid if I did, they would get discarded or destroyed. And the last I saw them was in the summer of 2003, shortly before I exited the station myself and they were still languishing in this room kind of forgotten. I just would reiterate the importance of having institutional memory because institutional amnesia seems to be the trend. We forget the histories that got us to where we are, and those tapes are the products of a lot of work, a lot of sweat, a lot of tears, a lot of people made them that are no longer with us. This is history. So in a way they were being, they were being preserved because they were ignored. It's sad, but that's the way it was.

Jocelyn Robinson: During this time, many WYSO-produced programs beloved for years were eliminated including Vick's, replaced by slickly produced national programs. Long-time volunteers and contributors were heartbroken — and incensed. So they rebelled. A group called KEEP WYSO LOCAL was formed and protests mounted. Membership support declined and the station faced a crisis of identity even as the sound became perhaps more palatable to a wider audience. After years of contentiousness and strife, cooler heads prevailed, a community advisory group was formed, and the general manager resigned. A lot of damage had been done. But in 2005, things began to turn around when Paul Maassen arrived on the scene.

Paul Maassen: So when I arrived at WYSO, yeah, there was a transition going on. It seemed like, well, there was sort of a tug of war going on for the sort of soul of the station. But what I recognize from going there and interviewing, and just talking to people prior was that there was this huge passion for the station, big time passion for the station and the role that it could play in the community. And I said what needs to happen here is we just need to be able to figure out how to harness that energy and use for everybody's benefit. And so we just kind of all got in a boat and rowed in the same direction, you know, after a while. And I think that that's what, what made a difference.

Jocelyn Robinson: So when you came and you worked with community to institute some healing, institute some forward momentum after this contentious period of time, were you aware of the tapes? Did you know that they were there?

Paul Maassen: No, I knew there was a lot of archive material, you know, WYSO has a very rich history. And I knew there was a bunch of archived material. I remember talking digitizing it back when I was there and all those kinds of things. I never really got a chance to dig into any of that.

Jocelyn Robinson: Did you ever see it?

Paul Maassen: I remember seeing some boxes of tape, if it's reel to reel tape. Yeah. There was some boxes and they would have, you know, inscriptions on them. And, uh, I remember looking at those going, you know, somebody should really listen to these someday and, and figure out what's on there, but yeah, so that's, I mean, that was the extent of it. Yeah.

Jocelyn Robinson: Maassen left for WWNO in New Orleans in 2007, and a year later, the Community Advisory Board threw a Hail Mary, hiring Neenah Ellis, a Peabody award winning journalist and long-time producer with NPR. She recalls her first days on the job in the winter of 2009, exploring the radio station with the operations director.

Neenah Ellis: Well, I actually remember the first day, the radio station was in the basement of a building, that had been a social sciences building, and our facilities had at one time, I think, been a chemistry lab. So it was pretty disorganized kind of space for a radio station. Plus the building was shut down. And the only thing in it was the radio station. So the heating system was dysfunctional. The cooling system was dysfunctional. We later that first year we had flooding and mold. And, uh, it was just not a really safe environment for people or equipment. I never took my coat off that day because it was so cold in the office spaces. So we would go up and down the halls and look in all the closets and see where everything was. And he and I went down this one hallway at the far end of the building. It was dark, it was damp. There might've even been like water on the floor and there was this locked door and he went and found the keys and opened it up. And, you know, it's like that classic [*creak*] the door hinge opens. We turn on the light and there's this cement block room musty, dark, dusty. And on one end of the room, there were stacks of cardboard boxes and we went over there. I remember it like it was yesterday, opening up the top of the boxes and finding there were piles and piles of quarter inch tapes in boxes. And, um, we started taking the tapes out and inside the tapes looked pretty stable, like they hadn't been recently opened. So we just started going through these and reading these tape boxes. It became clear that this was a treasure trove of local history. Famous people had been recorded at Antioch College in the, uh, Sixties, Seventies, Eighties. It's important to know that Antioch college had been a strong, strong anti-war campus with a lot of student activity and the students there had a lot of agency and they were bringing in speakers from all over the country, during the anti-war period, during Black Power, there were feminist speakers, there were poets, there were writers that were musicians. But one tape in particular that I remember was finding this speech of Martin Luther King, who had come and spoken at a commencement ceremony at Antioch. Now this was known to people. It wasn't lost history, but the tapes had been stuck on these shelves for, I didn't know for how long. I remember like at night thinking, oh my God, what are we going to do? We have to save these tapes. I knew enough about tape preservation that I knew we couldn't play them, or we shouldn't play them because they were so old and they could have been affected by sticky shed syndrome, which means that all of the tape oxide would come off if we played them. So, there they were, just in this state of suspended kind of animation. And it wasn't long after that it was in the spring. So it couldn't have been two months later that one day an RFP pops up in my e-mail box from the CPB. And it said, uh, do you have an archival collection that needs to be saved? I was like, oh my God, this was meant for us.

Jocelyn Robinson: That request for proposals from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting was for the American Archive of Public Broadcasting. It was a new project mandated by the US Congress to find and preserve the millions of dollars of taxpayer-funded public television and radio programs created over the years. This would be the perfect opportunity to resurrect the tapes, and with them, the deep connection to the College and to community the station had once maintained. A proposal was submitted, and WYSO became one of only 24 public radio and television stations across the US to pilot the AAPB project. And the rest, as they say, is history. The WYSO Archives was born. Through the project, Archivist Deanna Ulvestad was hired to organize the collection, stabilize it, and select tapes to send out for digitization. It was in a pretty compromised state, as she recalls.

Deanna Ulvestad: The room was full of tapes. They were stacked on the floor, on the table, the boxes were starting to break open on some of them and it was just probably, it was really the smell. It was kind of this intense basement smell in the room so it was really rather difficult to even stay very long in the room. Most of these quarter inch tapes were in boxes, which was great. I think that really saved the collection on some level because of just really it being moved around several places on campus. None of the storage were good even prior to the awful room

in the basement. We didn't know that we could even, if anything would be even left and amazingly when the stuff came back, um, the audio was really great.

Jocelyn Robinson: The audio was really great. Here's that tape of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Antioch Commencement in 1965.

[ARCHIVAL AUDIO OF Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING'S ANTIOCH COMMENCEMENT SPEECH]

Jocelyn Robinson: So rescued tapes became part of the foundation upon which Neenah Ellis began to build a new and improved WYSO, one that celebrated its legacy and local connections and recommitted to building on them. Ultimately, about 300 of the 3000 tapes were digitized, and those recordings were remarkable. The voices of local people, of students and faculty were represented. But in addition to Dr. King, there were other voices of the times, too, like President Lyndon Baines Johnson, Black nationalist Kwame Ture, poet Robert Bly, writers Alice Walker and Susan Sontag, jazz musician Cecil Taylor, oral historian Studs Terkel, and many more. A few years after Ellis arrived, she instituted a program to get people involved with the radio station once again. Community Voices teaches locals to gather and tell the stories of the diverse communities in the listening area. With professional quality gear and training both in its use and interviewing techniques, the airwaves are now alive with locally produced programs about teenagers, rural life, veterans, the opioid crisis, and more. And in order to create local content to augment the newly formed WYSO Archives, especially the material from the civil rights era, a project was developed to gather stories from the people who'd lived it. So with a renewed sense of mission and direction, WYSO moved yet again in 2012. The licensee, now Antioch University, had made a substantial investment in the radio station's facilities. This time, WYSO moved into a professional suite of studios and offices, with a climate-controlled storage room. Now the archival tapes and the music library of vinyl LPs and CDs are housed where temperature and humidity are monitored. The tapes, in their original flat boxes, sit upright on shelves in their original numbered order. They are accessible. They are stable. They are safe. Even though only a small portion of the collection was converted, the digitized tapes yielded a wealth of material. And Luke Dennis, then the station's development director, knew just what to do with those riches. WYSO would return the tapes to the airwaves.

Luke Dennis: What they capture are key moments in the history of this country. Like the civil rights movement, the Vietnam protest movement, the women's movement. It captures the voices of people who participated in those movements, who moved them forward, who put their, their souls and their passion into it. And it's, it's people who were living and working here in the Midwest, because so often the story of our country is told from the perspective of big cities and because of the legacy of Antioch College, there's a very rich and interesting history of social justice activity that happened right here in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and this part of Ohio. And that those voices had been kind of locked away or trapped in these archival tapes from WYSO. And they hadn't been heard from for a long time. So we proposed to bring the, that era of the civil rights movement back to life.

Jocelyn Robinson: With the help of an Ohio Humanities grant, *Rediscovered Radio*, a series featuring the archival audio began airing in 2014. And the contents of the WYSO Archives was heard once again, connecting the past to the present and beyond, to the future. And that future for the tapes – and WYSO – is bright. In 2019, WYSO supporters formed a non-profit organization called Miami Valley Public Media and purchased its FCC license from Antioch. Luke Dennis stepped into the role of general manager, and Neenah Ellis became the first director of the Eichelberger Center for Community Voices, a division of the station where community storytelling is taught and celebrated. The WYSO Archives are an important part of the programming, too, serving as the repository for the past and the future.

Luke Dennis: But WYSO our identity has always been so much more than being an NPR affiliate station. Our roots are as a, as a community radio station. Right. And that's been part of our DNA from the very beginning.

Jocelyn Robinson: Now community owned and operated, the station's fortunes are no longer tied to Antioch College, though that legacy is honored through the WYSO Archives.

Luke Dennis: I will say that it's important to me to continue the work in the archive because there's so much to do. Not just the digitization, digitization of the rest of the tapes, but access to them and inviting people from around the world to use them for research or for story creation. I think there's so much to be done with the archiving of our born digital content too. So every week the WYSO staff is cranking out stories that for now have a home on our website but what about in ten years from if somebody wants to understand what it was like to live in Dayton during the coronavirus pandemic. How will we make our material accessible to future generations? So having a plan and having resources for all of our archival stuff is important to me.

Jocelyn Robinson: So lesson learned. This cautionary tale reminds us that we neglect the past at our own peril. Even in the face of the uncertainties caused by a global pandemic, WYSO is poised to continue serving its listeners and telling their stories, now more important than ever. It's a community radio station, just like its founders intended. And because of an oversight, because of collective neglect, because some old tapes were overlooked and forgotten for many years, the larger mistake of throwing out the historical treasure wasn't made. The lesser mistake of benign neglect preserved it long enough to be rediscovered, and in turn to play a role in the renewal and reinvention of WYSO.

[OUTRO-ARCHIVAL TAPE OF LIVE BLUEGRASS CONCERT]

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