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A Time to Give

—Recording Family History

This holiday season, use your recording chops to capture treasures you can't buy: *memories!*

By Paul J. Stamler



December—a time to give. Giving to people you care about, giving to your community. How can you use the skills and equipment you've accumulated as a recordist to make people happy? For the last three Decembers you've given a CD of your songs to everyone on your list; maybe it's time to try something new.

Here's an idea out of left field: what about using your talents and gear to do *oral history* with family members? Everyone has stories to tell. Did Grandpa get muddy at Woodstock? Did Grandma march against Jim Crow with Dr. King?

These are the stories that give texture to history; they are your personal contact with the fabric of the world. And they pack some surprises. I knew my mother was a Rosie the Riveter, but had no idea that Dad knew Bluesman Big Bill Broonzy ("Not well, but I knew him"). The stories, and the surprises, enrich your world and that of your family.

But as generations pass, the stories get lost. That's where you come in, you and your microphone.

Tech stuff and people

Recording oral history, especially with family members, presents a different set of challenges from recording music. Musicians are (mostly) accustomed to microphones, are used to doing their thing with the red light on and a mic six inches from their mouth or instrument. Non-musician family members, particularly older people, often find the mic intimidating, even terrifying.

Your job, therefore, is to keep the tech stuff unobtrusive and non-threatening. One obvious route is provided by the new generation of digital recorders, most of which come with built-in microphones that can be excellent for oral history work.

When you learn about your family,
you learn about yourself and about
how you fit into the world.

Let's talk fundamentals first. You want to record oral history well, and that means recording .wav files, not .mp3s. Record in 24-bit; storage is cheap these days. And turn OFF any automatic gain control in your recorder; AGCs will pump the background noise level up and down, and squeeze any hint of dynamics out of your recording. (If needed, you can always add compression as you edit.)

Instead, set the volume manually, and be conservative with levels; a recording that peaks at -10 dBFS is fine in 24-bit format. If your recorder has a hard limiter to prevent digital clipping, that might be worth using, but do a test recording first to make sure it's transparent when not actually working. If your recorder has special effects (reverb, etc.), *turn them off*. You want the simplest possible recording for your interviews.

For reasons I'll discuss in a little while, a good place for a portable recorder is flat on a table, or better flat on a folded-up soft towel on the table. It's good to place it so you can see the meters, and reach the controls. Ideally, though, once you start recording, you can leave the machine alone, which avoids distractions for your not-used-to-recording subject.

All you need is lav

Another possibility for recording oral history is the *lavaliere* microphone, or just *lav*. They are standard for television; they're tiny, and barely show up on camera, yet they can give surprisingly good sound quality. Radio Shack sells a couple of models that aren't half bad for the money; a miniplug-to-XLR adapter will enable you to plug into a standard mic preamp.

It's important to clip the lav close to the subject's mouth; for men, clip it to their tie or the front of their shirt, right below the top button. For women, the front of a blouse or the neckline of a dress is good, but watch out for rustling fabric; if your subject is wearing a dress made from something noisy, perhaps another type of miking is called for.

Whatever you do, try to position a lav mic on the same side as you'll be sitting on; you don't want the subject turning off-mic when they turn and face you.

Lav mics are mostly omnidirectional; you might try putting one on yourself and one on your subject, but watch out for phase problems. The old "3-to-1 Rule" still works most of the time: if the distance between the two mics is at least 3 times the distance from the mic to the sound source (in this case the subject's mouth), you should be okay. (That only works if the sound sources are about the same volume, but most of the time in oral history recordings they will be.)

Quiet as a mouse

Some people get nervous with lav mics pinned to them, or you may not have one handy. (On the other hand, some people *like* having a lav pinned on them; it makes them feel



important, just like the people on *Meet the Press*.) What about using a regular mic on the table in front of the subject?

Using a mic on a desk stand can lead to problems. The culprit is the table itself; the sound takes one path directly from the subject's mouth to the mic, and another, longer path from mouth-to-table-to-mic. When the two sounds meet and mingle in the mic, the combination of direct sound and bounced sound creates phase interference, comb filtering, and that dreaded "hollow" sound.

Many years ago engineers figured out that if you place the mic's capsule right on the table, or just a fraction of an inch above it, any comb filtering from table bounce will happen up at the highest frequencies of the audible spectrum, where they're less bothersome, or at ultrasonic frequencies, where they can only annoy audiophile bats. They devised a gadget called a *mouse*, which suspended the mic horizontally in such a position that it floated just above the table. (I suspect that the people who named the computer mouse were influenced by this gadget, since they actually look slightly similar.)

Let's talk

"Okay, I'm set up, but I've never done an interview. What do I ask?"

There are many books on interview technique (there's a great section in William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*), but most of them are aimed at journalism, not oral history. A book that talks about families and oral history, including some valuable insights on how to do it, is Michele Norris's *The Grace of Silence* (Vintage, 2010). Norris, a veteran radio journalist and sometime host of *All Things Considered*, encourages readers to do oral history with their own families, and gives some excellent interviewing tips. (The book is also a moving account of her family's own history, concentrating on the time after World War II.) What follows is drawn partly from Norris's book, and partly from my own experiences doing oral history with family members and an assortment of musicians over the years.

Norris notes that some of the best family stories get told at meals, and suggests combining an oral history session with a good dinner. Serve the dinner first; once your interviewee is well-fed and mellowed out, quietly start the recorder. A little coffee often helps the words flow. Combining oral history with dinner is one reason on-the-table recording setups are good; you can make a seamless transition from food to talk.

It's worth making a list of some basic questions to create a framework for your conversation. Don't treat the list as though it's carved in stone; be ready to follow up one answer wherever it leads. Think of your conversation as a series of links; as you jump from one link to the next, you get farther and farther into the topic. That series of jumps can be your most fruitful tool.

Keep visual clutter to a minimum; having too much technical gear showing can be intimidating. If you're using your regular studio rig, run a long cable from the dining room and have a confederate handle the controls in the studio.

At home, one very effective way to do the mouse thing is to use a thin piece of foam, just thick enough to hold the mic away from the table by about $\frac{1}{8}$ ". If your mic has a windscreen on it, allow the screen to float $\frac{1}{8}$ " above the table. Another effective tool is a heavy towel, folded a couple of times. Either foam or towel can help provide shock isolation along with suspending the mic in the right position. Now you know why I suggested putting portable recorders on a towel; their mics are similarly susceptible to table-bounce phase issues.

The ultimate mouse is a housing which holds a mic capsule a pre-determined small distance from a mounting plate. This arrangement is called a *Pressure-Zone Microphone*, or PZM; they can be surprisingly effective for oral history recordings. The term is a Crown trademark; Radio Shack made one under license for years, recently discontinued but possibly available used. The current Crown-brand model is the Sound Grabber II.

Oh, one other thing: keep the visual clutter to a minimum; having too much technical gear showing can be intimidating. If you're using your regular studio rig, run a long cable from the dining room and have a confederate handle the controls in the studio. If you're monitoring on headphones, use earbuds; they're a lot less obtrusive.

Eventually, though, a set of links will peter out. That's the time to ask another question from your list.

One thing I want to emphasize, though, is that you probably shouldn't treat this as a regular conversation. In normal conversations, as soon as your subject gets done talking, you jump in with another question or rejoinder. *Don't do it!* If you wait a few seconds, your subject may continue to answer with more detail or a related topic; if you jump right in after their sentence seems finished you may miss some pure gold.

That pause, what interviewers call the "pressure of silence", gives the subject a moment to mull and perhaps extend his or her remarks in ways that may reveal a whole new side to the story; if you chop that off by jumping on top of their sentence, you'll miss what may be your best moments. Don't be afraid of pauses; if necessary, you can edit them down later.

Mr. Nice Guy

Be gentle. You're not Mike Wallace tracking down a wrongdoer; you're a family member out to learn. Keep yourself out of the story; jumping in with, "Oh, that reminds me of something that happened to me once" is a good way to derail the whole process. The interview is about the other person, and the people connected with them, not you.

Should you do oral history with several subjects at once? Sometimes it's fruitful (it was for Michele Norris), but I usually prefer to work one-on-one. In a group, the most assertive personality controls the narrative, and may squelch the quieter people who can open up when the more forward person's not around.

Under normal circumstances, never ask a question that can be answered with "Yes" or "No"; often, that's all you'll get. Instead, ask open-ended questions;

instead of "Were you in the Army?" ask "Tell me about basic training" or "What happened on your first day in the Army?"

If you have a notebook or index card for your questions, keep a pen handy to jot down new questions that arise during the interview.

You may run into a difficult issue, something painful for the subject to remember. Try not to push them; remember that this project is an act of love. Don't necessarily back away from the hard stuff; stay supportive, but let them talk if they can and want to. If they tell you, in so many words, "I can't talk about that," that's the time to step back and go elsewhere, maybe say, "I understand" and move on to a less-loaded topic. Surprisingly, the subject may eventually veer back to the rough area on their own; when they do, shut up and let them talk.

At ease

There are various ways to put an interviewee at ease. The great documentarian Studs Terkel used to cultivate the illusion that he didn't quite know how to work his recorder, even occasionally giving it a gentle kick. He found that this



created a sense of camaraderie with the subject; "You and me against this infernal machine." I've never been able to pull that trick off; instead, I try to develop an attitude of, "We're in this together. Let's explore."

One important bit of housekeeping: always say the date and place of the recording, who the interviewee is, and who you are. For example: "I'm talking with Jerry Steinberg on January 5, 2013, at his house in Palo Alto, California. I'm Joe Steinberg, Jerry's nephew."

How long should an interview last? You'll have to play that by ear; I've done some as short as half an hour, some as long as two hours. Do what's comfortable. Sometimes, two or three short interviews may be better than one long one, particularly with older subjects; you don't want to tire them out.

Later

After you've done your interview(s), what are the next steps? First, do backups; remember the principle that "If you ain't got it in three places, you ain't got it." Back up the interview on an external hard drive, on your thumb drive, and/or as a data CD. Keep at least one copy offsite; if you live in an active seismic zone, ship a copy out of town. Do the backups *before* you do any editing; this

is the archive copy, the one you (or a descendant) can go back to for future reference.

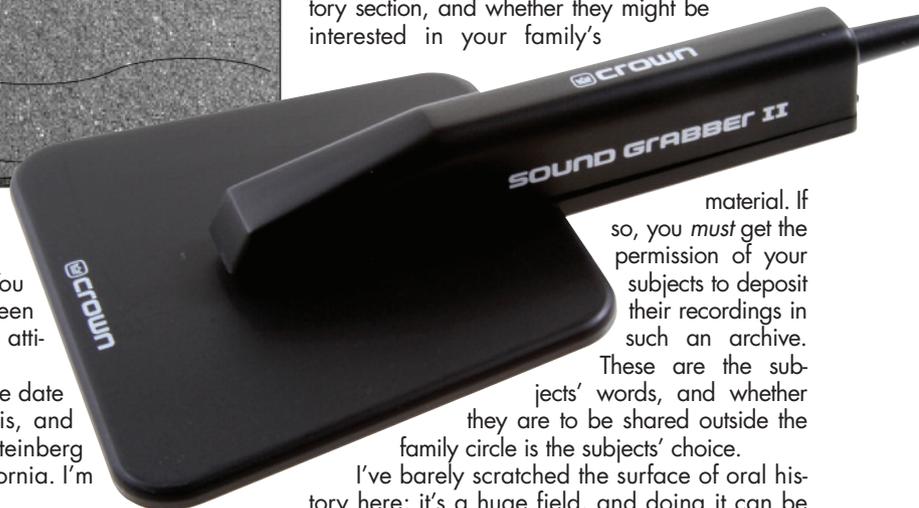
The editing is straightforward enough, and can be done in a simple 2-track editor like Audacity (which is free) or the track editor in Adobe Audition. How much should you edit? That's really your call; do you want it to sound NPR-tight, or looser and more informal? Whatever you do, try to keep the person's speaking style intact; if they like to pause, you might shorten the pauses a bit without eliminating them completely. Stay true to the speaker's rhythm. If there are extraneous noises (someone bangs the table, say) you should usually take those out, if you can do so without interfering with the narrative. Remember, it's about the *story*, not the recording.

I don't recommend over-producing; resist the temptation to load the recording into a DAW and add "mood" music. The talk should create its own mood, without artificial help.

Format

The most likely format for your final product will be a CD-R. Use good ones; at the moment Taiyo-Yuden blanks are probably the most favored for long life. You may wind up with several interviews on a single disc; allow some silence at the end of each track to give listeners a chance to make the transition. Again, back up everything. Do it on multiple formats; CD-R, thumb drive, hard drives galore.

Some of your family's narratives may be of interest to the wider community. Ask your local historical society or public library if they maintain an oral history section, and whether they might be interested in your family's



material. If so, you *must* get the permission of your subjects to deposit their recordings in such an archive.

These are the subjects' words, and whether they are to be shared outside the family circle is the subjects' choice.

I've barely scratched the surface of oral history here; it's a huge field, and doing it can be quite addictive. It can also be incredibly rewarding; when you learn about your family, you learn about yourself and how you fit into the world. If you try it, you might find yourself creating a gift that resonates for years and generations.

Who knows? People might even start calling you "Studs." ➤

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