

Brass Band Archive Recordings

**a brief guide to recordings of brass bands in
libraries, museums and other archives**



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Introduction

Brass bands are, of course, musical organisations first and foremost, and the bulk of their heritage is bound up in the hundreds of thousands of concerts, marches, contests and other performances they have provided their audiences with over the years. Very few of these live performances were ever recorded, at least until recent years, and we must depend on the formal studio recorded performances to enjoy the music of the bands of the past.

Aside from the broadcasts of brass band music which, unless it is recorded/archived elsewhere, is ephemeral, most recordings rely on the physical media available at the time. Even today, with digital recordings on the internet, the reliance is still on the underlying hardware to store the music – only on silicon chips rather than wax cylinders.

Recording technologies are generally split into four eras

- The acoustic era (1877-1925) – where vibrations from sound produced by performers were directly transmitted to a recording medium via a diaphragm to a stylus which inscribed the analogue sound waves
- The electric era (1925-1945) – the introduction of electric microphones and amplifiers made the recording process easier, with greater control and range of frequencies, but the signal was still mechanically inscribed on the master discs which were then used to stamp out the production copies.
- The magnetic era (1945-1976) – the introduction of magnetic tape technology provided a significant step forward in the recording process, allowing multi-tracking and higher fidelity recording, with subsequent transfer to the production media.
- The digital era (1976-present) – digital sound encoding, introduced by Sony in the 1970s led the way for a revolution in the capabilities for both professional and amateur recording.

The media that were used to store the recorded sound were varied, and there were quite a few alternatives over the early years.

- Prior to 2008 it was assumed that Edison's phonograph was the earliest sound recording device. However researchers discovered recordings made on a phonautograph, a machine that recorded the sound visually on paper, and which was not designed to play them back. The inventor was Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville a Parisian typesetter. The first recording analysed and recovered, from 1860, was 10 seconds of someone singing *Au Clair de la Lune* – the first known recording of a human voice. Further research discovered an earlier recording from 1857 of an unknown cornetist playing a scale – the earliest airborne sound reproduced to date.
- The earliest recorded band music was in the form of the Thomas Edison's phonograph. This originally consisted of tinfoil wrapped round a cylinder, but

it was too crude for commercial purposes, and it was not until the late 1880s when the removable wax cylinder was introduced. Earlier recording technologies had existed but it was Edison's that started the recording/production revolution.

- Towards the end of the 1880s the gramophone made its appearance – invented by Emile Berliner, it consisted of a disc upon which a spiral groove contained the sound signals. Soon the shellac formulation became the standard medium for discs and the 78 r.p.m. recording/playback speed a general standard, although other speeds and media were used.
- The introduction of polyvinyl plastic as the disc substrate in the 1940s led to the ability to have greater quality in the playback, and the use of slower speeds 45 r.p.m., 33 1/3 r.p.m., and occasionally 16 2/3 r.p.m. meant records became capable of holding longer recordings – ultimately up to nearly an hour on a later stereo LP (long player) record. The 45 r.p.m. 7" diameter format was most often used for "single" two-sided records, usually of "popular" music. The similar sized EP (extended play) record played at 33 1/3 r.p.m. giving about twice the playback time of the single. The 12" or earlier 10" LP records were used for albums of collected tracks or longer, usually classical, works.
- The next medium to become popular was the reel-to-reel magnetic tape. This was a great way to record music and sounds, but did not take off as a commercial means of distribution music to customers, except in specialist areas. It was, however, very useful for home recording.
- 4-track tape cartridges and later 8-track cartridges were most often used for music in cars from the mid-1960s to the 1970s
- The introduction of the Compact Cassette, which was developed from dictation machine tapes, became the dominant home recording system and quickly became a viable alternative to the disc records, particularly in the mobility of the medium – being easy to use in cars and portable tape machines, and later the Sony Walkman for personal audio.
- The digital revolution was started by the introduction of the Compact Disc (CD), which rapidly overtook all other music production media. Recordable CDs became available eventually, but they were never as popular as the compact cassette had been.
- Digital Audio Tape (DAT), Digital Compact Cassette (DCC) and Minidisc were digital recording technologies that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although they were popular and useful for recording professionals, they did not appear as significant products for commercial digital music distribution.
- The introduction of the .mp3 .wav and other sound file formats and associated player technologies (e.g. Ipod) revolutionised the production and distribution of sound and music from the early 2000s onwards.

Brass Band Recordings

Brass bands have been represented in all of these technologies and media over the years, both in commercial, published recordings and home/personal/unofficial recordings.

Many such recordings still exist in personal collections, music libraries, archives and, more recently, digital archives which have digitised recordings from older media, cleaned up the sound and preserved them in lossless digital audio files. Access versions, using compressed formats can be used to provide the recordings to end users – on a free or paid basis.

However, finding such recordings is not an easy task. The audio archives “industry” is not as mature as that of the printed book and does not have the same breadth and depth of catalogues and finding aids.

The recording history of brass bands in the UK is very ably covered by Frank Andrew’s book on cylinder and 78rpm records, and Peter Gammond’s and Tim Mutum’s books on the later vinyl records – the latter also covering the first few years of brass band compact discs, to 1991.

Since 1991 there has not been a complete listing or discography for brass band CDs (and latterly DVDs). There are listings in the IBEW of brass band recordings (from 78s through to CDs) but certainly the CD discography there is not up to date or complete. See: <http://www.ibew.co.uk/misc26c.htm>

How many brass band recordings are there?

An accurate count is not possible without full details of the tracks on individual recordings and albums, but a very rough guess can be made:

- Cylinder recordings (a small number)
- 78s - 800 brass band + 250 Salvation Army (c. 2,000 tracks)
- Vinyl (LPs, Eps & singles) – 1200 (c. 10,000 tracks)
- CDs – 1600 (c. 16,000 tracks)
- Cassettes – 110 (c. 1,000 tracks)
- Other media (tape, radio/tv broadcast/film archives) – unknown
- Oral histories – memories, anecdotes and occasional music - unknown

So, conservatively some 30,000 pieces recorded and available over the last 115 years.

Sources and locations

Most recorded music is still available in its physical form in the hands of individuals, collectors, libraries and archives. Some has been digitised, for preservation and access purposes, and is available online.

The works and documents of individual composers, classical, brass band, military band, etc. are often left to or housed in various university libraries and archives – e.g. Arthur Bliss & Peter Warlock at Cambridge University. These archive collections often include copies of recordings of their works for brass band (where applicable).

British Library Sound Archive – a large collection of music, spoken word and other recordings. This includes the Allan Littlemore collection of Fodens recordings which he donated to the BL.

<http://www.bl.uk>

Library of Congress - a large collection of archive sound recordings, including Band Music from the Civil War Era

<http://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-war-band-music/>

University of Salford Archives & Special Collections

Roy Newsome collection – including audio recordings

<http://www.salford.ac.uk/library/archives>

UCSB (University of California Santa Barbara) Cylinder Audio Archive - Various vintage band recordings are featured here – e.g. “Miss Trombone” performed by the Indestructible Military Band (1919)

<http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/homewax.php>

County/state archives & record offices - together with local history societies occasionally have archival recordings of bands

e.g. Oxfordshire History Centre has recordings of the “Brass Bound” programmes from Radio Oxford in the 1970s

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/leisure-and-culture/history/oxfordshire-history-centre>

e.g. the Wessex Film & Sound Archive

<https://www.hants.gov.uk/librariesandarchives/archives/wessex-film-sound>

The National Brass Band Archive - an archive of more than 10,000 sets of music and scores, recordings, programmes, band journals, memorabilia and more. A resource for the serious researcher and the simply curious. Established in the 1970s by Walter Ainscough, for many years this was located in Wigan. Sadly use of the premises was withdrawn and the archive is now under the guardianship of Brass Bands England. Funding is being sought to establish the archive in a new location with the facilities befitting its national importance.

<http://www.nationalbrassbandarchive.com>

Many brass bands have historical information about their heritage on their websites, some have audio clips of their performances and recordings, a few of which are vintage in nature.

Black Dyke Band Heritage – a collection of recordings and memorabilia

<http://www.blackdykebandheritage.co.uk>

Fodens Band Heritage – a collection of recordings and memorabilia

<http://www.fodensbandheritage.co.uk>

BBC Radio 2 – Listen to the Band – various recordings available on BBC Sounds
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds>

Internet Archive Great 78 Project - a collection of 78rpm records and cylinder recordings released in the early 20th century
<https://archive.org/details/78rpm>

Wax Cylinder Recordings - in the archive section there are many recordings of early American bands around 1900. E.g. Edison Concert Band playing Chopin's Funeral March (1906); Sousa's Band playing the Stars & Stripes Forever (1901)
<http://www.tinfoil.com>

Edison Sound Recordings
<https://www.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/the-recording-archives.htm>

Salvation Army Music Index - extensive database of Salvationist brass and vocal music, with audio and video recordings accompanying some of the entries
<https://samusicindex.com/brass>

Norman Field's online archive of vintage recordings – various digitised brass band vintage recordings available online
<http://www.normanfield.com/brassband.htm>

Regal Zonophone - an extensive collection of audio files from vintage Salvation Army records
<https://www.regalzonophone.com>

Brass Band Audio Database - established by Heinz Schmidt, restoring and digitising vinyl recordings, creating a searchable book with all available album information, and this includes other data like first release date; soloist(s) on each album; title information, playing time, composer, arranger, conductor etc.
<http://www.wsp.audio/wdb/wvbbdb.html>

Choice Recordings - Re-issues of vintage recordings, including “The Cornet King”; “Fabulous Fodens”; and “Vintage Gems”
<http://www.choicerecordings.com>

Keeping brass band vinyl records alive – a collection of recordings
<https://www.facebook.com/keepingbrassbandrecordsalive/>
<http://www.rescuedrecords.uk>

British Film Institute - a number of films archived featuring brass bands (including Granada Band of the Year, Brass in Concert etc.)
<https://www.bfi.org.uk>

Some examples:

- Spare Time (GPO Film Unit, 1939) which showed various workers' spare time pursuits including the Steel, Peech and Tozer Phoenix Works Band

- **Play up the Band** (City Film Corporation, 1936) - A Yorkshire band comes to London for a competition. The wife of the proprietor has her necklace stolen and suspects two bandsmen but they are cleared just in time [fiction/comedy]
- **The Brass Band** (Northern Arts, 1975) - A fantasy about a young man who is apparently being pursued by a third-rate brass band across desolate sand dunes, and despite his frantic efforts to escape, he is cornered, with supernatural ease, by his pursuers in a giant sand pit. The sinister and threatening encounter which follows however, merely results in him being presented with a Triangle. Confused and embarrassed, he is trying to return this unwanted object when the band suddenly march off, carrying him along with them. The rest of the film chronicles his unexpected reactions to the situation

British Pathé - has a number of film clips featuring brass bands
<https://www.britishpathe.com>

First Sounds – making humanity’s earliest sound recordings available to all
<https://www.firstsounds.org>

Yorkshire Film Archive - over three hundred search results - examples:
<http://www.yorkshirefilmarchive.com>

Some examples:

- YFA 5608 – 1969 - Where There's Brass - YTV documentary
- YFA 4745 – 1962 - Men of Brass - Guiseley Brass Band

Youtube - various bands’ “archive” or historic recordings available here
<https://www.youtube.com/>

Soundcloud - various bands’ “archive” or historic recordings available here
<https://soundcloud.com>

First known musical recording (cornet) – from First Sounds – relevant section starts at time 45:30
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75UrxueiP-4>

Further information

- ***The Brass Band Bibliography***, with nearly 6,500 entries, is available online as a PDF download at <https://gavinholman.academia.edu>
- **Oral histories** – these are increasingly important resources about the lives of our ancestors. Local historians and oral archivists have been recording the memories of people in their areas and workplaces, building up a rich source of material about the past. Details of brass bands encountered or even played in are included in some of the material. In many cases searching the archives is made easier by subject and topic keywords for the recordings.
<http://www.ohs.org.uk> [Oral History Society]
<http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/weblinks/> [list of oral history organisations]
- **American Bandmasters Association Research Center** - this includes the ABA Archives (including the Sousa/Ostwald Award), personal papers of ABA members, ABA score collections, ABA recording collections, the Midwest Clinic Archives, and College Band Directors National Association Archives.
http://lib.guides.umd.edu/scpa_band

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The three major books on brass band recordings