

# **'The Too Vigorous Use of a New Broom': Towards a Methodology for Analysing the Gendered Meanings of Sound in History**

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## **Abstract**

*The role of sound as an historical source has recently begun to gain greater attention within history, with Greg Goodale arguing for the importance of sonic sources in understanding the complex experiences of the past. As is perhaps concordant with an emerging area of research, coherent methodologies to deconstruct sound historically have not yet been adequately developed. This article begins to address this problem through the development of a methodological approach to analysing the gendering of sound. Using the recording of Dame Enid Lyons's maiden speech to Australian federal parliament as a case study, I analyse how recordings of speech can be 'read' to reveal how gender was constructed in specific ways. I argue that Lyons vocally constructed a version of political femininity using particular speech markers, vocabularies and pitch ranges. This article therefore breaches the boundaries of historical analysis by developing a new approach for analysing a neglected type of source material – sound recordings.*

## **I. Introduction**

Dame Enid Lyons had a voice that was known to all through her years of radio broadcasting. As her biographer Anne Henderson has argued, it was through her 'unpretentious' yet 'deftly modulated' voice that she became a mother to the nation in its time of need (Henderson 2008, 188–89). Yet although Lyons' style of speaking is often mentioned in historical accounts of her remarkable life, an analysis of the sound of her radio speech, and indeed those of many other Australian women, has yet to be undertaken. My research focuses on women's speech on Australian radio during its mid-twentieth century golden age. Although historians of Australian speech, radio, and modern womanhood have so far largely neglected this topic, a small number of scholars in the United States, Western Europe and South America have examined the

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connection between women's radio speech and public citizenship (Halper 2001; Halper 2008; Hilmes 1997; Lacey 1996; Skoog 2014; Ehrick 2015). This study will test the conclusions reached by these international scholars through a focus on the distinctiveness of the Australian experience. Compared with other regions, Australia had a different radio industry, particular experiences of women's enfranchisement and political participation, and characteristic debates about speech. This study will also contribute to the history of Australian radio by providing the first comprehensive study of women's radio speech in this country. As part of this research, I aim to analyse the sound of women's voices on number of sound recordings, particularly radio broadcasts, in order to understand how the use of particular speech styles indexed femininity. Without analysing the sound of the past, and particularly the sounds of radio, we are missing a rich part of experience in modern society and are overlooking the ways in which radio speech constituted a central part of gendered experience.

However, this task has proven difficult, as a coherent methodological approach to analysing sound recordings historically has not yet been developed. Interest in listening to the past has increased over the past few decades, and a number of historians have begun to use 'sonic thinking' in their work, largely by reading documentary sources for evidence of the varied sonic experiences of the past. This includes Jonathan Sterne's work on the history of sound technologies, Mark Smith's examination of the role of social history in the development of sensory history, Peter Bailey's exploration of the importance of noise in shaping past societies, and Joy Damousi and Delsey Deacon's edited collection on sound and Australian history, among others (Sterne 2003; M. M. Smith 2003; Bailey 1996; Damousi and Deacon 2007). The connection between sound and modernity has also been examined by Kate Lacey, Emily Thompson and Steven Connor, who have demonstrated that the auditory played a crucial role in the construction of the modern self and society (Lacey 2013; Thompson 2004; Connor 1997). The increasing digitisation of sound recordings, such as by the National Film and Sound Archive and Australian Institute of Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander Studies, also provides exciting new opportunities for historians to engage with sound (National Film and Sound Archive 2016; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies 2014).

Historians have also begun to examine sonic sources using a variety of categories of analysis, including Greg Goodale's analysis of the race of jazz performance, Jacob Smith's examination of sexuality and spoken word recordings, and Martin Thomas' work on sound recordings and Aboriginal culture (Goodale 2011, 77-97; Smith 2008, 50-77; Thomas 2007). Christine Ehrick's recent work on women's radio in Argentina and Uruguay, in which she explores the concept of the gendered soundscape, has also introduced a sustained analysis of the gendering of sound to this discussion (Ehrick 2015). However much more research is sorely needed in order to understand the historical construction of gendered soundscapes over time and their social, cultural, and political functions.

The scholars who have worked with sound have so far tended to utilise a broad and disparate array of approaches. Jacob Smith and Greg Goodale, for example, have both analysed sound recordings; yet neither has provided a particularly detailed outline of their methods beyond recognising the necessity to pick and choose approaches as required (J. Smith 2008; Goodale 2011). The most detailed explanation of a methodological approach to reading sound historically can be found in Neil Verma's 2012 monograph *Theater of the Mind*, in which he analysed recordings of American radio dramas, but this also presents an eclectic mix of methods, rather than a coherent methodology (Verma 2012). Ehrick has also used creative yet disparate ways to incorporate sonic sources into her work, and has also highlighted the difficulties of representing an 'aural personality' through the text of a scholarly history and thus the need to develop a more sophisticated vocabulary to describe the historic recorded voice (Ehrick 2015, 41-42). There is therefore much more work to be done to better incorporate sound of the recorded voice into history.

In the course of my research so far I have received advice that sound sources are no different than printed or visual sources, and as such should be treated just the same. Although historians are increasingly using sonic sources, their ability to analyse them as thoroughly as textual or visual sources has so far been curtailed due to the lack of an appropriate methodology. This represents a problem which requires a solution that incorporates sound into mainstream historical methods and which goes beyond claims to just use the same tools as we would in a textual or visual analysis. Furthermore, as Ehrick has shown, the gendering of sound has been particularly neglected by historians, which highlights a need to develop a methodological approach to address this particular question (Ehrick 2015, 20).

In this article, I will outline the methodology I am developing for utilising sound recordings as an historical source, and will particularly focus on how recordings of voices on radio can be read to reveal complex historical processes of gendering in the media. To demonstrate this I will focus on a recording of a radio broadcast of Dame Enid Lyons reading her maiden speech to federal parliament as a case study. Firstly, however, I will turn to discuss social semiotics as a starting point for analysing sound historically.

## **II. A Methodology Based on the Social Semiotics of Sound**

A major approach to the analysis of media representation has been semiotics, which refers to the study of signs or symbols as elements of communicative behaviour. Purely structural semiotics has been criticised for focusing on language as an unchanging structure, which denies the historically-contingent ways in which language develops and changes as well as the ability of users to interpret, evaluate and alter it (Inoue 2004, 41-42). To this end, social semiotics has emerged as a methodology which interrogates how the codes of communication are constructed by social processes, such as gender. A social semiotic analysis reveals not only the signs embedded in particular texts, but seeks to understand them within broader social and cultural discourses, and thus also has the potential to recognise the historically

contingent meanings of audible voices. Using the work of several theorists as a starting point, including Theo Van Leeuwen and Andrew Crisell, I am developing a methodology for reading the gendering of sound historically. This rests on three major tenets: Media, Historical Context, and Vocal Focus (adapted from Van Leeuwen 1999, 16).

Media refers to anything which enables the sound recording to be produced and disseminated. This includes any relevant technological context, presentation styles or conventions, or how the audience is identified and addressed. As my work is largely focused on radio recordings, some particularly relevant questions would be related to the programming of the broadcast, such as which stations it was played on, what time and date it was played and its length. This information, along with any other relevant evidence, can help to identify the intended audience, and thus how a particular vocal performance was constructed and delivered. In his social semiotic approach to the analysis of radio, Andrew Crisell further notes that the sounds of broadcasting are deliberately constructed, as presentations are usually scripted, certain sounds are foregrounded and others softened or silenced. Furthermore, the constructedness of the radio broadcast is often deliberately obscured to make it seem as if a presenter is speaking spontaneously (Crisell 1986, 58–59). As such, identifying the particular influence of media is crucial to understanding how the sound recording was constructed, what its purpose was and potentially how it was received.

Historical Context recognises that sound recordings cannot be analysed in isolation, but require significant contextual research to make sense of what the sounds we hear now meant in the past. As Theo Van Leeuwen argues, a social semiotic approach to analysing sound must recognise the historical context of the recording (Van Leeuwen 1999, 8). It is therefore necessary to perform appropriate archival research prior to analysing recordings semiotically. This may involve biographical research, research into specific technologies or industries, or broader research into representations and experiences of gender in particular contexts. In short, it involves using the skills and sources we have already mastered as historians to make sense of these neglected

source materials and ways of experiencing the past. There are potential problems with this solution, such as the risk of privileging textual material over sound or erroneously using sound to reinforce assumptions gleaned from textual sources. However, while bearing these issues in mind, I believe that this approach can allow for sound recordings to be more fully integrated into historical analysis.

Vocal focus refers to the sound of the voice that is being analysed, and it is here that we can identify and analyse the communicative signs of speech. This aspect can be broken down into three analytical categories: audible vocal signs, language and discussion topics, and distance. Audible vocal signs refer to the sounds of speech which hold spoken language together, and this can be difficult to interpret. Nonetheless, by conceptualising pitch, intonation, stress, accent, and other audible aspects of speech as *signs*, it is possible to analyse them and identify the social and cultural work they are performing. These signs are also embodied, and serve to index the gendered body sonically. As Van Leeuwen states: 'when a sound travels, its meaning is associated with the place it comes from and/or the people who originated it, or rather, the ideas held about that place or those people in the place to which the sound has travelled' (Van Leeuwen 1999, 139). The audible voice is therefore a sign of the body in temporally and spatially diverse locations and it is understood with reference to discourses surrounding the roles that body is expected to perform.

Language and discussion topics provide a second, interrelated way in which the voice can be heard as gendered, both through the use of language which directly refers to gender (such as through referring to oneself as a mother), or indirectly refers to gender through the use of particular language traits or topics which have been coded as feminine or masculine. Word choice is therefore closely related to the audible vocal signs, as appropriately gendered language and vocal performance must be concordant to be perceived as feminine or masculine.

Distance is important for signalling how a particular voice should be heard and related to, firstly through perspective, whereby different sounds are placed at

different 'distances' from the listener, and secondly through social distance, whereby different types of speech signal different levels of formality. Van Leeuwen identifies a continuum of five types of social distance: intimate, personal, informal, formal and public. Intimate and personal distances are characterised by softer, quieter and lower voices, while formal and public distances are characterised by louder and higher-pitched voices (Van Leeuwen 1999, 27). However, as Jason Loviglio demonstrates, radio complicates this continuum as it was a medium which blurred the demarcation between public and private (Loviglio 2005). Intimate forms of speech became a means through which radio became part of the private domestic sphere (Griffen-Foley 2009, 118).

### **III. Case Study: The Maiden Speech of Dame Enid Lyons**

One case study which demonstrates the usefulness of my approach is a recording of Dame Enid Lyons reading her maiden speech to federal parliament for broadcast on ABC radio stations in the 1940s ('Dame Enid Lyons: Maiden Speech' 1944). In September 1943 Dame Enid Lyons became the first woman elected to the federal House of Representatives, along with Dorothy Tangney, who became the first woman elected to the Senate. Their election was seen as momentous, and their maiden speeches became the subject of significant public interest (Henderson 2008, 277-83). In this analysis, I will particularly focus on the first section of Lyons' speech, in which she discusses her role as the first woman to be elected to the House of Representatives. The following quotation from that speech demonstrates the centrality of gender to how Lyons positioned herself within parliament:

I know that many honourable members have viewed the advent of women to the legislative halls with something approaching alarm; they have feared, I have no doubt, the somewhat too vigorous use of a new broom. I wish to reassure them. I hold very sound views on brooms, and sweeping. Although I quite realize that a new broom is a very useful adjunct to the work of the housewife, I also know that it undoubtedly is very unpopular in the broom

cupboard; and this particular new broom knows that she has a very great deal to learn from the occupants of - I dare not say this particular cupboard. At all events, she hopes to conduct herself with sufficient modesty and sufficient sense of her lack of knowledge at least to earn the desire of honourable members to give her whatever help they may be able to give (Lyons 1972, 169-70).

Reading this speech alone provides a powerful indication of the influence of gender. However, listening to the recording adds greater complexity to the analysis. Lyons employed particular vocal styles, including pitch, intonation and stress, which worked to emphasise her femininity in specific ways and, crucially, to differentiate herself from the male members of parliament. As such, only reading the Hansard transcript of her speech does not fully illuminate the complex gendered meanings of this historic moment.

I will firstly address the media context of this recording. Although the speech was originally given on 29 September 1943, this recording was probably produced in early 1944 for special broadcast (Doyle, n.d.; Doyle, n.d.; Department of External Affairs [II], Central Office 1944).<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this is not a live recording of the speech, as this substantially changes how it was produced and heard. Indeed, live recordings of parliament did not begin until 10 July 1946 (Harris, Wright, and Fowler 2005, 118). As it was intended for radio broadcast, the audience would most likely have listened to it in a domestic setting, as radio sets in this period were located in the living room and were a major source of family entertainment and domestic companionship for housewives (Johnson 1988, 20, 90).

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<sup>1</sup> Senator Dorothy Tangney's maiden speech was recorded by the ABC on 21 April 1944, although there is no specific date for the recording of Dame Enid Lyons' speech. However, I have researched ABC national broadcasts from 30 September 1943 until the end of 1944, and have not found any evidence that the speech was broadcast. Based on the date of Tangney's recording, I have found that both Tangney and Lyons recorded talks which were broadcast in May 1944. As such, it appears that the ABC also recorded their maiden speeches at the same time for posterity. The National Film and Sound Archive also states that the speech was distributed to radio stations which indicates that it was probably broadcast, at least in part, at some stage.

Moving on to historical context, there are many major avenues of research which could be performed to be able to read different aspects of the recording. These include the political climate of the time, the fact that it was produced during the Second World War and that her party, the United Australia Party, was in opposition. For the purposes of this article I will focus on important aspects which can help to read the gendering of her voice. Firstly, understanding Lyons' role as a public figure is crucial to be able to read the sound of her speech. She was well-known and admired as the wife of Joseph Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia from 1932 until his death in office in 1939, during which time she developed a reputation as a capable orator (Langmore 2012). During her husband's time in office Lyons was also appointed as a Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire by King George VI in 1937 for public services to Australia - an honour which gave her significant status (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 1937, 4). The Lyonses also regularly broadcast during this time, and their radio talks became a central plank of their political strategy (Henderson 2008, 188-89). Lyons continued broadcasting after her husband's death, including giving a series of talks on the Macquarie Network in 1939-1940 (Griffen-Foley 2009, 29). Dame Enid Lyons, therefore, was a well-established and highly respected public figure prior to her election to parliament, and was also a well-known public speaker and radio voice.

Furthermore, Lyons was also perceived as a particularly maternal figure. During the first half of the twentieth century a concept of maternal citizenship was developed which promoted white Australian women as the mothers of the race, who should have citizenship rights bestowed on them on that basis (Eveline 2001, 141). As Marilyn Lake has argued motherhood was promoted as a service to the state, equal to men's paid work, and white women's value to the nation was argued to be in their capacity to rear children (Lake 1993, 379). Lyons' political rhetoric exhibited this notion of maternal citizenship through her promotion of the importance of the mother, support for child endowment, and role of the state in supporting the family unit. Her citizenship and political position was dependent on her contributions to the state as a mother, and both she and the media emphasised this point. Lyons' radio talks were

central to her political participation and public citizenship, and through these speeches her voice was a sonic index of her maternally feminine body. Yet it is important to emphasise that this was a white body; as Joan Eveline has argued, maternal citizenship excluded and further oppressed Aboriginal women (Eveline 2001, 147). Indeed, it is not coincidental that Dame Enid's speaking style was a performance of a white, British ideal of femininity. As such her role as what Henderson has described as a 'mother to the nation', speaking to the public through the radio, reinforced exclusionary discourses of women's public citizenship (Henderson 2008, 188–89). In her maiden speech Lyons therefore utilised both maternalist rhetoric and a vocal performance which worked to position her as a modern female politician, defined by motherliness and public citizenship.

With reference to the specific qualities of her speaking style, it is important to note that Lyons received elocution training as a child and even performed in elocution competitions (Lyons 1965, 32–33). Elocution training was promoted for women as a way of cultivating a vocal style which indexed an ideal version of genteel, British femininity – the vocal embodiment of the maternalist ideal. As Joy Damousi argues, the 'intellectual refinement' that defined genteel femininity was associated with the voice, and particularly with the cultivation of a balanced, melodious style of speaking (Damousi 2010, 119). Furthermore, as Deborah Cameron demonstrates, elocution has been seen as a feminine activity due to its superficiality but, like many other superficial or cosmetic practices, it was made normative for women (Cameron 2012, 170). Thus, by speaking in the cultivated style promoted by elocution training, Lyons conformed to ideals of vocal femininity. Indeed, her cultivated vocal delivery was an important focus for much of the media commentary of the speech. The *Adelaide Advertiser* described her as speaking with 'great emotion and clarity of voice', the *Burnie Advocate* described her as an 'attractive speaker' in its headline, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that she spoke 'clearly and fluently' (*The Advertiser* 1943, 2; *The Advocate* 1943, 2; *The Sydney Morning Herald* 1943, 4). In her autobiography Lyons herself described how the press was 'unanimous in praise' of her oratory, and

mentions one report which praised her 'control of inflection and phrasing' (Lyons 1972, 39). Lyons' style of speaking, influenced by her elocution training, was therefore crucial to her performance of femininity, and the radio broadcast would have aimed to capture the vocal quality that was considered to be such a feature of the original speech.

Another important area of research is the broader context of attitudes to women's public speech in Australia, and particularly attitudes to women's speech on radio. Damousi, in her analysis of the oratory of the feminist Vida Goldstein, argues that a feminine vocal performance was essential for Goldstein to 'disarm her critics' and legitimise her position as a female political leader in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Vocally projecting femininity when speaking publicly was particularly difficult due to the taboo against women's public speech in this era; crafting a feminine persona through the voice provided one way in which Goldstein could mitigate the 'threat' of her public speech by appearing to conform with ideals of femininity (Damousi 2010, 179–81). Indeed, although speaking several decades later, I argue that Lyons also employed a similar tactic, and this is apparent on the recording. By making use of her elocution training while also using plenty of feminine language and positioning herself as a woman she could mitigate hostility to her presence in a previously all-male space. As Lyons stated in her speech, many would regard her presence in parliament with 'something approaching alarm', however she aimed to 'conduct herself with sufficient modesty and sufficient sense of her lack of knowledge' to earn her place within the chamber ('Dame Enid Lyons: Maiden Speech' 1944).

By the time Dame Enid Lyons came to prominence, radio had emerged as a dominant means of mass communication, and she had made extensive use of the medium since her husband was Prime Minister (Henderson 2008, 188–89, 264–67). When this recording was produced, therefore, Lyons was a popular speaker on radio and would have been very familiar with it. She was, however, also speaking within a context of contested meanings of women's voices on radio. Women announcers were often

restricted to supposedly feminine topics and to presenting on daytime women's sessions, and women's voices on radio became a particular topic for debate in this period, with many believing that women's voices were too shrill or lacking in authority to be effective presenters on the air (Damousi 2010, 251; Inglis 1983, 32; Clarke 2014, 495-98). Yet this only tells one part of the story, and neglects the multitude of ways in which women's voices populated the airwaves during radio's golden age and the significance of this new era of female orality. Indeed many others believed that women's voices could be appropriate, and even charming or beautiful on radio ('Hopeful' 1935, 14; 'Appreciation' 1935, 14). There was thus support for particular types of feminine speech on radio, particularly those that fit an ideal of the well-modulated, articulate and soft voice. Female actors such as Lyndall Barbour, Dinah Shearing, Muriel Steinbeck and Margo Lee were bigger stars of serial dramas than their male counterparts, recognisable to listeners just by the sound of their voices (Lane 1994, 192-95, 215-18, 244-48, 287-90). Furthermore, it was common for female social and political activists, including early female parliamentarians such as Lyons, to give regular talks on radio about a range of issues (see for example Richardson 1988, 14). This suggests that radio provided opportunities for women to speak publically in new ways and, further, for the public to hear women's voices on both a much larger scale and in a more intensive way than ever before.

I will now turn to discuss some of the audible vocal signs present on the recording. Lyons employed a moderately high pitch, which challenges work which has suggested that women needed to adopt lower pitches to be elected and respected publically (Jamieson 1988, 84). Lyons utilised her higher pitch to sound ideally feminine, yet it is important to note that she was not considered to be shrill due to her style of delivery, particularly her accent and use of elocution techniques. Lyons speaks with a received Australian accent, which can at times sound almost English. This was normal for the time and would have been considered the ideal, particularly for a woman speaking on the radio. As Damousi has noted, radio provided 'a new benchmark of correct Australian English', and broad Australian accents were not

heard on the airwaves (Damousi 2010, 240–44). Lyons' previous elocution training also fostered a particular style of speech which can be heard in the recording, such as through her measured delivery, lilting intonation, modulation and rolling of the letter 'r' and aspiration of the letter 'h'. Indeed, Lyons articulated almost every letter when she spoke; the clarity of her voice, so praised by the media, was therefore apparent through her enunciation and measured pace. Lyons did not hesitate or falter when speaking, and deftly modulated her voice to give particular stress to important points and pauses for effect – she was a fluent speaker.

The style of vocal performance is reinforced by her language and topics of discussion. Lyons makes both direct and indirect reference to her gender many times throughout the speech, such as through reference to herself as a woman, and particularly as a housewife and mother, or her use of feminised metaphors and phrasing – particularly her extended metaphor of herself as a new broom in the broom cupboard of parliament, or her admission that the other members would have to get used to the 'homely metaphors of the kitchen' ('Dame Enid Lyons: Maiden Speech' 1944). This language assists the listener to classify the voice as feminine. The beginning of her speech is also specifically about her status as the first woman in the House of Representatives and the unique challenges and opportunities this presented. As a role model for other women, Lyons could draw on her status and oratorical experience to signal her non-threatening, maternal femininity, as well as her competence and determination in public affairs.

Finally, the distance of the recording influenced how her voice was heard. The primary sound on the recording is Lyons' voice, which is the focus of the recording. The only other sound is the ambient, crackling background. By this point, commercial radio had developed as a medium characterised by intimate presentation styles, which generally fostered a personal or even intimate distance in which the presenter was speaking one-on-one to the audience (Griffen-Foley 2007; Johnson 1988, 73). The ABC, however, largely resisted this intimate style in favour of a detached, authoritative, anonymous and deep male voice closely modelled on BBC announcers (Goodman

2011, 25–26). As David Goodman notes, this approach resulted in the ABC being perceived as distant and unwelcoming by many, a tricky context for a politician who placed value on more intimate forms of contact with listeners (Goodman 2011, 25–26). However K. S. Inglis demonstrates that women on the ABC were not associated with this authoritative ideal like their male counterparts, and indeed were often considered to be unable to project authority through their speech (Inglis 1983, 32). This context reveals the complex meanings of speaking as a woman on golden age radio. Lyons' speech is given in a fuller voice at a higher volume, and could be characterised as a formal or even public distance. Indeed, this was a re-enactment of a formal political speech, and the social distance ensured that it retained a level of authority, even if this was an authority mediated by feminine perspective. Yet the feminine vocal signs, particularly pitch, also placed limits on the extent to which the speech would have been related to as a formal or public distance, and thus perhaps worked to make the address more intimate for radio listeners. As such, it could be said that this was a style of presentation which straddled the line between public and intimate speech.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This recording reveals the complex processes of gendering which can be heard in speech. Dame Enid Lyons vocally positioned herself as a woman in the House of Representatives – with particular knowledge, but also occupying a particular space. Her vocal performance was also strongly influenced by her long history of public speaking and broadcasting, including her elocution training. Indeed, it is through the use of this training that Lyons could project an ideally feminine style of speech in order to mitigate hostility to her presence in parliament. Further, her language and choice of discussion topics indexed an ideal of maternal femininity, and therefore matched the audible signs to construct a coherently ladylike style of speech. As my research demonstrates, Lyons' voice was a particularly important aspect of her maiden speech, and being able to hear her read the speech restores sound into historical analysis. Without analysing the sound of the past, and particularly the sounds of radio, we are missing a rich part of experience in modern society and overlook the ways in which

speech constituted a central part of meaning making. Further, we risk essentialising sound by neglecting to historicise it. The methodology I have outlined in this article can help us to analyse the sound of the recorded voice and understand its historical significance. Further, by incorporating social semiotics as its basis, it breaches the boundaries of historical analysis and provides some new tools to capture the rich and varied sounds of the voices of the past.

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