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Flying Past, Present, And Future

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Eying Past, Present, and Future

Peter Agelasto thinks like an archaeologist to help Bob Dylan and others preserve their legacies

By Gerry Boyle '78 Photography by Forrest MacCormack





The story is about Peter Agelasto '96 and his groundbreaking digital-archiving work for Bob Dylan and others. But Agelasto starts at the beginning, which is at Colby, where the banjo-picking Virginian designed an independent major in archaeology that led to a semester in Honduras, where he exhumed a clay flute from a Mayan tomb, cleaned it with dental picks, and put it to his lips. "I was the first person to play it in a thousand years," Agelasto said.

So what does the dusty ocarina have to do with Starchive, the media-archiving software that Agelasto and his team have developed that is now being used to provide digital access to hundreds of thousands of long-buried artifacts for Dylan? And what does a Colby independent major have to do with cutting-edge technology?

According to Agelasto, everything. "At the core of what makes the liberal arts really important to technology," he said, "is that there is this seed."

His company, Digital ReLab, founded in a barn in rural Roseland, Va., has spent a decade and a half developing its innovative digital platform, which is being discovered by renowned artists and musicians intent on preserving and purveying their digital legacy. Agelasto and company are working with the artist Urs Fischer on a massive digital archive and are in talks with R.E.M., Wynton Marsalis, the Dave Matthews Band, and Dolly Parton, among others. And that, he said, is just as the company is "beginning to be discovered." But the flute?

The Mayan flute was pivotal, Agelasto said, because it was followed by a month spent exhuming the tomb and collecting artifacts. "It went to a storage unit in Tegucigalpa," Agelasto recalled. "And I asked myself, 'What good is that?'"

He says the experience was bad karma, that clues to the past were discovered only to be entombed again. But, along with his Colby studies in anthropology and religion, it provided him with an archaeologist's tools—and an incentive to capture material culture from the present and future, not just the past. "I wanted to be part of the next link rather than just looking for the missing link," Agelasto said. "I knew something was out there."

That something is a looming and overwhelming problem—with an enormous potential payoff.

As Agelasto explained it, our culture has been and is being captured in millions upon millions of video and audio files, still images, original documents, analog recordings, film, and other artifacts. Technology is making the capture easier but has far outstripped our ability to organize, distill, and access the materials we collect. "We say that the 1960s changed culture," he said. "If we saw the ninety-five percent of the media that we didn't see from the 1960s—what is that going to do?"



“

We've been searching for the right tool to organize the enormous amount of material generated by Bob Dylan over his career. Digital ReLab has transformed our creative and business opportunities and made collaboration simpler.”

—Matthew Lewis,
archivist at the Bob Dylan
Music Company

Agelasto, a bushy-haired guy with a moustache and flashing eyes, and Digital ReLab have created a digital archiving system that enables identification, dissection, and organization of digital documents as well as stuff sitting in boxes, stored on hard drives, stacked on shelves in basements and cabinets and closets. He describes the enterprise as “archaeomedia,” a term that connotes his determination to develop not just software, but a way for our culture to study and reflect upon itself.

“It’s playback that is forging culture,” he said. “... Playback is how we experience culture. And playback exists on metaphysical levels. It exists in our minds and in our dream world, but it also exists in our physical or material world, via the radio and the TV and the Internet.”

Agelasto is part web developer, part philosopher, part media guru. His TEDx talk referenced the Mayans, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan, among others. All are directly connected in his vision of past, present, and future. That he turns this vision into software is unusual but, to those who know him, not unexpected.

“He was a thinker,” said Crawford Family Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus Thomas Longstaff, Agelasto’s advisor for his independent archaeology major. “It wasn’t just the details. He always wanted to see the bigger picture.”

According to Longstaff, Agelasto’s tracing of his professional journey back to his Colby studies is no reach. At the time he was working with Agelasto, Longstaff was maintaining the database of an archaeological dig he was working on in Israel. He said he taught Agelasto two critical concepts: one, the need to have very precise records, and two, the difference between archaeological artifacts and antiquities. Antiquities are objects. Artifacts are objects in context. The same applies to a recording of a song, a photograph, a file of digital concert footage.

“When you’re archiving it, it’s not just saving a record of the song,” Longstaff said, “but a lot of the information about who listened to it, when it was listened to, the period in which it was popular—all these other details that are part of what makes it an historical record instead of just an interesting piece of material from the past. That is something he would have learned.”

Learn it he did.

The percolating had begun as Agelasto, visions of long-dead Mayans still resonating in his head, backpacked around India after graduation. A musician, he’d been recording with his Colby bandmates on a four-track

machine, but knew “an amazing shift and rift” was about to happen in the music industry—and it was digital media. But first a detour, one that would prove to be crucial to Agelasto’s future.

During his India tour, he stopped to visit his uncle, an academic teaching in China. The uncle introduced Agelasto to a student who was in a rock band. At a time when Chinese students were first beginning to go abroad, Agelasto invited the band to Virginia. Then he went back to Nelson County and, with his Colby and musician friends, built a recording studio.

“Before Kickstarter, I gave them hammers, screwdrivers, drills, Skilsaws,” he said. “We built a recording studio



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**—Crawford Family Professor of Religious Studies Emeritus
Thomas Longstaff**

out of twenty-five percent postconsumer recycled waste. We’re taking down barns and scavenging for glass.” The resulting studio was called Monkeyclaus, and it was in full swing when, to Agelasto’s surprise, the Chinese punk band arrived.

They stayed with Agelasto for 352 days, when immigration officials finally refused to keep extending their visas—and Agelasto decided it was time to return the favor.

Working connections, he got the bands Sonic Youth and Beastie Boys to sign on for a China tour, but they were rejected by Chinese authorities because the musicians supported the Free Tibet movement, he said. Undeterred, Agelasto tapped a friend who knew one of Bob Dylan’s managers. Agelasto typed out a note on Monkeyclaus letterhead, explaining the so-called Chinese-American rock-and-roll cultural exchange program and adding, “We would love it if Bob Dylan wanted to go to China and play all these shows.”

“No one had played China at this point,” Agelasto said. “This is 2002.”

Miraculously, Bob Dylan’s people responded. They said, “You know, this is really interesting. And it’s a bit ridiculous. Is this for real?”



Sara and Peter Agelasto '96, at home in Virginia, also the home of Digital ReLab, developer of a software program used by musicians and artists.

It was, and negotiations continued. The week the contract was to be executed, the SARS epidemic erupted. The tour fell through, but the Dylan connection survived.

Agelasto went back to the recording studio and, having taught himself HTML, started building websites. For a decade he explored the technology around the Web, considering what digital files are made of. Working with his wife, Sara Agelasto, he developed an early-stage social media platform for her yoga instruction business. A digital download store followed, as did knowledge of Linux and Open Source content management platforms. "Because he understands the technology so well, he can see where it's going," Sara Agelasto said. "So he keeps pushing the edge on the technology and he keeps getting involved with developers who also are swept up by his charisma. ... Eventually they're able to code and develop this idea that he has."

Over time the goal became clear: to build a system where the organization of media began when it was created. Voila! Access to decades worth of stuff was made simple. "We realized that if we were going to make a successful digital media platform, we needed to remove any of the work," he said.

Starchive took a team of developers 80 months to build. One version, produced at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars, was scrapped and reworked. "We need really strong feats of engineering and we've got that in this platform," Agelasto said. But at the core was the vision of culture developed so many years before, he said. The seed had been planted on Mayflower Hill.

Ultimately the seed grew into a new way to save original material. "We sit an application layer on top of all audio-visual media, images, basically everything," Agelasto said. "If you just save into it, or if you record into it, or save a livestream, it'll auto-populate a database, it will insert itself into a searchable web browser, it will maintain

security, it will give you all sorts of metadata, and basically turn into something useful that you could leverage in big ways.”

In other words, masses of material are now instantly searchable and accessible and can be separated into discrete elements: audio, video, still photos, metadata. All of it can be accessed in its original form. And when an artist has decades of work, much of it of cultural and/or commercial value, streamlining that parsing process is a tremendous boon.

Enter Dylan’s people. In 2012 Agelasto and his six-member team felt they were ready for prime time. Agelasto’s friend Jim Fishel, a recording industry veteran and now a Digital ReLab vice president, introduced him to Jeff Rosen, Dylan’s manager in New York. The idea was pitched—to the organization surrounding perhaps the most iconic musical figure of our time. “Jeff says, ‘Let’s do this,’” Agelasto recalled. “We had zero résumé. We just had the light in our eyes. And the will to work.”

While a nondisclosure agreement prevents him from talking about just what archival material exists, he said there are many thousands of files, including a half-century of recordings, writings, photographs, video.

“He is a constant reinvention,” Angelasto said. “Within the archive—because it’s multimedia, audio, video, and images—you really get to see, almost frame by frame, the shape-shifting of someone who could change culture just by looking at it.”

Agelasto’s software is “the right tool to organize the enormous amount of material generated by Bob Dylan over his career,” Dylan’s archivist, Matthew Lewis, has said about Digital ReLab.

Since selling Starchive to Dylan’s company, Agelasto and others in the company have been in talks with the artists mentioned earlier, the New York Philharmonic, archive giant Universal Media, and others.

He’s also begun working with artists including the sculptor Urs Fischer, helping his studio maintain a catalog of images, with metadata to reflect a work’s provenance, among many other elements. “It’s a repository for all of it,” said Abby Heywood, archivist for the Fischer enterprise in Brooklyn, N.Y. “The imagery, the catalogs, accounting information, working spreadsheets of projects, exhibition history—it’s where we want to put everything.”

Instead of navigating multiple routes to different types of media, Heywood said she can now search for a single term “and pull up everything related to a particular art work or a particular gallery or a particular show. Or a medium. Or a date. Just having that flexibility.”

Sara Agelasto, who has known her husband since grade school, isn’t surprised by the breakthrough. “I think that we’ve been working so hard for so long, and the way Peter talks about the work he’s doing, the ideas that he has—he’s always known that he’s going to make it big somehow,” she said.

Fishel said interest has broadened from artists and musicians to political campaigns, advertising agencies, the legal profession—all of which can benefit from nearly instantaneous access to and distribution of images, audio, and other media through multiple channels. “There is nobody who we have set up a meeting with who hasn’t expressed total excitement at what they’re seeing,” said Fishel, who has worked



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—Abby Heywood, archivist for the sculptor Urs Fischer

with Time Life Inc., CBS Records, and the Recording Industry of America. Investors are taking notice, he said.

Agelasto acknowledges that he and his associates are on their way. “We’re pretty level-headed,” he said. “Sweatshirt, hoodie-wearing musician techies who are starting to get the ears of some pretty interesting folks.”

The seed planted in Colby archaeology studies has grown into a tree, with branches that may change the way we see ourselves and our culture. Agelasto predicted that, too.

“I’ve always felt that Colby was a launch pad for really creative people who were grounded enough in their own skin to go out and do the things that actually end up making a difference in the world,” he said. ©