

Plugged In

Lobbyist Stephen Brown has amassed a huge library of unauthorized live recordings

Stephen Brown's hobby once put him crosswise with the rock band Dire Straits, but such are the hazards of being a bootlegger.

In the mid-1970s, Brown worked as a stage manager at a Washington, DC, venue before beginning his career as a Democratic congressional aide and oil industry lobbyist. It was the perfect spot from which to add to his growing collection of live shows, which he recorded with or without a band's approval.

Dire Straits fell in the "without" camp.

"We don't know where this fucking wire goes!" Brown, 63, remembers the band's manager swearing, refusing to allow the show to start. Brown removed the offending cord. Temporarily.

"When they weren't looking, I plugged it back in," he says, linking the group's soundboard to a reel-to-reel recorder he'd hidden under the stage.

The performance is among the 27,000 hours of live shows, studio outtakes and radio broadcasts Brown has accumulated over the past four decades. His collection is cataloged on a site he created called [DC Dead Tape Exchange](#).

Record labels have gone to great lengths to guard against piracy, the unauthorized use and distribution of copyrighted, officially released music.

Brown operates in a [grayer legal area](#). Performances aren't copyrighted. There are antibootlegging statutes, but Brown says he's in the clear legally so long as he doesn't sell any of the material or trade with anyone who does.

Musicians react differently to being recorded. The Grateful Dead, whom Brown once worked for as a lobbyist, believed the notes were no longer theirs once they left their instruments.

Others, like the [famously fussy Bruce Springsteen](#), try to prevent the practice, says Brown, who is a big fan of The Boss nevertheless.

In an age of computer-enhanced recordings, Brown says what he's searching for authenticity. Live shows are the true test of musicianship and capture a magic that sanitized studio sessions don't, he says.

The mischief of it all appeals too, a not-following-the-rules attitude that fits the rock n' roll aesthetic.

Brown, who has kept his hair a little longer than the typical political professional, maintains contacts at concert halls across the country who are ready to put the plug in for him, with or without a band's OK.

"You want to hear the stuff they don't want you to hear," he says.