Preserving an Endangered Musical Culture:
The Birth of the Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University

By Maxine Schackman and Nathan Tinanoff

Maxine Schackman, PhD., is a retired clinical psychologist. She started volunteering for the Judaica Music Rescue Project at Florida Atlantic University Libraries about three years ago and is now the Assistant Director of the JSA. She is passionate about "spreading the word" about this wonderful Jewish heritage preservation project.

Nathan Tinanoff, a retired IBMer, assumed responsibility for the sound recordings at FAU Libraries in 2002. Since that time, as Director of the Judaica Sound Archives, he has created one of the largest and fastest growing collections of recorded Judaica music anywhere in the world. He is committed to finding new and innovative ways of sharing the contents in the collection to ever-increasing audiences through the internet.

Introduction

Today's presentation traces the birth and growth of the *Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University Libraries* (JSA) from its beginnings as a volunteer effort to save fragile phonograph records into what it has become today -- a center for the preservation and digitization of recorded Judaica music and voice.

I am Maxine Schackman, the Assistant Director of the Judaica Sound Archives at FAU Libraries. With me today is Nathan Tinanoff, the Director of the JSA. Amazing as it may seen, most college students today have never actually seen a phonograph, a 78 rpm recording or even an LP record. These cultural artifacts and the sounds they contain are in jeopardy facing the real danger of being forgotten and buried by the sands of time.

The Beginning

You are probably familiar with Aaron Lansky. He's the man who outwitted history by rescuing Yiddish books. When Nat Tinanoff accepted responsibility for the small collection of Judaica Sound Recordings at the FAU Library in the summer of 2002, he immediately thought of Aaron. "Why can't I do for Jewish music what Aaron has been doing for Yiddish books?" he thought.

When the two men finally met in December 2002, Nat not only came away with a wonderful supporter for his idea, he also came home with over 4,000 phonograph recordings that had been accumulating at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. It was at this point that the Judaica Music Rescue Project was born.

The emphasis, at the time was on rescuing the recordings before they were lost, damaged or discarded. With no budget to buy recordings, it was clear that encouraging donations of materials was the only way that the collection could grow. It took a lot of press releases, networking and persistence. But the results can speak for themselves.

Since 2002 over 26,000 recordings (78s, LP's, tapes, 45s and CDs) have been donated by institutions such as the Baltimore Hebrew University, the Center for Yiddish Culture, Spertus in Chicago, and the University of Judaism, to name a few. In addition over 570 individuals have donated their personal collections to the JSA.

Defining the Mission

The Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University Libraries (JSA) has now accumulated one of the largest collections of Judaica sound recordings in the world. It is committed to collecting, digitizing, and promoting through education, this cultural and historical treasure.

The JSA at Florida Atlantic University Libraries uniquely combines three major factors.

- *An emphasis on growing the collection*: JSA is committed to seeking out the recordings and encouraging their donation to FAU Libraries for safe keeping. The JSA not only preserves Jewish music (Yiddish, Cantorial, Sephardic, and Hebrew); we also preserve music by important Jewish artists, composers and conductors.
- *Technical savvy:* A dozen dedicated computers are used in almost every aspect of our work.
- *Staff:* Drawing upon the numerous Jewish retirees in southern Florida, the JSA is able to organize a corps of volunteers to donate their time, and effort for the project. In addition, we have student workers and seven employees who keep the wheels moving smoothly.

Using volunteers, we have created an efficient way of processing donated recordings so as to avoid overwhelming backlogs. Today the JSA has over 30 volunteer workers doing all kinds of tasks. Our volunteers

- sort thousands of records
- accurately enter the information into databases
- clean and store the actual recordings for later digitization
- verify information in the databases
- translate foreign text into English
- scan labels and album covers
- and digitize tracks.

In addition we have about 25 volunteer collection agents (we call them zamlers) all across the USA and Canada who seek out vintage recordings for the JSA.

The Florida Center for Library Automation (FCLA) has given FAU Libraries a grant to catalogue and digitize some of the JSA's oldest recordings which will

then be included in their Florida Heritage Collection. Only those recordings produced prior to 1920 will be part of this digitization project.

Eventually one thousand digital tracks of Cantorial and Yiddish recordings along with scans of their labels and catalogue information will become part of the Florida Heritage Collection online. These materials will be the first on their website to contain sound and will provide FCLA with a template for future digital sound collections. So far, 768 catalogue entries have been created by FAU's Bibliographic Services and about 75% of them involve original cataloguing. These entries are available in OCLC WorldCat.

The recordings in our collection are historic and many of them are not in very good condition. For example, one of the recordings, Fanny Brice singing "Second Hand Rose," was introduced at the Zieglfield Follies in 1921. If you were to hear the original phonograph recording for you it would sound scratchy and it would be difficult to make out the lyrics. Now, through the wonders of modern digital technology, the sound is clearer and more enjoyable to listen to.

The Judaica Sound Archives had three major goals:

- To rescue phonograph recordings before they are lost, damaged or discarded.
- To create a comprehensive resource of recorded Judaica sound for scholars, students and the casual listener.
- To creatively explore the ways that we can share and promote the music in the collection (in accordance with copyright laws).

JSA Website

One of the most important vehicles for accomplishing this last goal is our website (www.fau.edu/jsa). Our website:
- Contains information about the history and mission of the JSA.
- Allows visitors to sign up for our e-newsletter.
- Contains important information for those who might want to donate their recordings (This page not only gives detailed instructions about how to pack and mail recordings safely and inexpensively, it will even print a mailing label for you!)

But the heart of our website is a unique database search engine. Our database specialists have taken software which may not be generally well-known, but is very familiar to genealogists who regularly search for names with different spellings and created a new and exciting application for us.

Only the 78rpm database can be searched online at this time. Our LP database search engine is still under development.

A major problem facing someone wanting to find a specific song or artist in our collection of 78 rpm recordings is that we are dealing with several different languages – English, Yiddish, Hebrew are the most common.

How do you spell "Roshinkes mit Mandlen"? What if you only know the English translation "Raisins and Almonds"? A search will return not only exact matches to the English title but also Yiddish versions of the same song. Don't know how to spell a performer's name? Simply type in a spelling that seems reasonable to you and the search engine, using Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex encoding, will phonetically match it. You will get a list of all names that sound the same regardless of spelling. The same would be true for different spellings of Hebrew and Yiddish words in song titles.

The website also features the music from collections for which we have been able to obtain rights. At present we have two such collections online (*Children's Music* and *The Music of Sidor Belarsky*), but we are working on creating others and they will soon be online as well. [Note: Within weeks of the AJL presentation voice recordings of Cantors Zvee Aroni and Louis Danto also went online.]

Summary and Conclusion

The Judaica Sound Archives began with a list of under a thousand 78 rpm recordings in 2002. Today we have almost 7,500 individual song entries in our 78-rpm database.

Those that were produced prior to 1923 have been digitized. Some will become part of the Florida Heritage Collection online, but all will eventually become available through our website.

We also have a database which contains over 3,600 individual LP album entries. In addition we have a small collection of cassette tapes, 45 rpm recordings and CDs. Taken together this represents over 60,000 different recorded pieces.

Presently only about 400 songs are available on our website. The rest? They are waiting for the funding which will allow us to bring an ever-increasing amount of the collection to the internet.

Over 50% of the JSA collection involves the American-Yiddish experience. The collection also includes Israeli and Hebrew secular music, as well as a small collection of Sephardic music.

About 30% of the collection is cantorial or sacred music. Those present at the AJL Convention in Boston were able to hear the magnificent voices of three cantors from the past: Cantor Leib Glantz, Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt, and Cantor Moshe Kousevitsky. These cantors are no longer with us, but because of the work of the JSA their wonderful voices can be heard for generations to come.

Today you've heard a story about how a small collection of phonograph recordings grew and grew and grew into a ***center for the preservation and digitization of recorded Judaica music and voice.***

It started with one man and a small collection of cantorial and Yiddish phonograph records. Hard work and persistence have moved us forward. But, nothing occurs in a vacuum. The Florida Atlantic University Libraries have provided the fertile soil in which we could grow. The steady stream of donated phonograph recordings ensure or continued growth, and the willingness of the South Floridians to volunteer their time and skills enables us to accomplish much more that our budget would dictate.

Support from others, such as The National Yiddish Book Center and the Robert and Molly Freedman Jewish Archive at the University of Pennsylvania, strengthens us.

The idea to preserve this endangered cultural heritage has touched many hearts. The volunteers came, the records came, and lovers of Jewish music came. Literally hundreds of people have had a hand in making the JSA grow and thrive. It may sound to you like we've come a long way, and we have, but I can assure you, there is still so much more to do!

For more information, visit our website www.fau.edu/jsa, or contact Nathan Tinanoff, JSA Director - tinanoff@fau.edu.