Jewish sound archives race to preserve ethnic sounds

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press Writer

BOCA RATON, Fla. (AP) -- The woman was in her 90s and in the process of moving to a nursing home when Rhea Bertelli met her. The woman's husband had been a cantor, leading prayers in synagogues, and she had helped by composing and arranged Hebrew and Yiddish songs. Jewish records and sheet music filled her home, but the music was in danger of being lost.

"Her children were totally uninterested," said Bertelli, now 81. "She had to find a home for the music or it was going to go into a Dumpster."

The woman agreed to donate her collection to the Judaica Music Rescue Project at Florida Atlantic University, where Bertelli volunteers.

Bertelli and other volunteers have heard similar stories countless times. Since the project started in 2002 they've gathered more than 9,000 unique records (LPs, 45s and 78s), 8-tracks, cassette tapes and other materials. The project's director, Nathan Tinanoff, says some institutions have donated large collections, but he also gets packages of records from around the country, sent by people cleaning out closets, garages or attics.

The Judaica Sound Archives at the university now has about 60,000 unique songs, many of them in Yiddish, and it has become one of the largest repositories of Jewish music in the country. Still, organizers at the Florida archive and smaller ones at universities in Pennsylvania say they're racing to save the music as some of the children and grandchildren of those who enjoyed it decide to throw it out.

"People say to me 'Why are we doing this? My kids don't care,'" Tinanoff said. "What we say is that if we don't preserve the music now they'll never have the opportunity to determine if they do care. Maybe it will skip a generation and their grandchildren will really care about their heritage. If they do, we'll be there for them."

Maxine Schackman, the sound archives' assistant director, said the collection also captures important moments in history. She points to songs like "Roumania, Roumania," about immigrants who are longing for and idealizing their homeland, and "Die Greene Cousine," about a woman who has come to America expecting instant wealth and must instead work in a factory. Other songs like a Yiddish translation of "Goodnight, Irene" and even one called "Hot Dogs and Knishes," are also revealing, she said.

"This is about the history of America and the history of Jews in America," Schackman said.

Florida's archive isn't the only one trying to preserve Jewish sounds. A Dartmouth professor started an online archive of Jewish sounds around 2002. University students and researchers with a password can now listen to some 7,500 tracks online. Meanwhile the University of Pennsylvania is home to a collection of Yiddish music with some 3,000 songs.

Archive curators say saving the music is a challenge both because people may be throwing it out but also because of the deterioration of the materials the sound is on.

That's a challenge for Alex Hartov, who started an archive of what he terms "Jewish sound" at Dartmouth. He has rescued sound from 78s and tapes. He's also spent hours retrieving just minutes of sound from acetate disks, a creation of the 1930s and 1940s where music was pressed into a film.

"The vast majority of people couldn't care less. I'm not offended," Hartov said. Still, one Dartmouth professor now uses the collection in a class and Hartov hopes its use expands.

Bob Freedman, who runs an archive at the University of Pennsylvania, says his collection is perfect for classrooms and he'll often use the music in workshops on history.

"I can do something on immigration, on folklore, language classes," he said. "It gives people who aren't Jewish a sense of the culture."

Freedman said he frequently gets messages from people asking about a song their grandfather may have sung or listened to. They may not know the words, he said, but they want to find it.

"The sense of loss comes right through the computer screen," Freeman said.

At the Florida archive volunteers have already put 1,000 of the oldest songs online and hope to add more. One advantage the FAU archive has over other archives is space and a large work force of Jewish volunteers, Tinanoff said. Volunteers across the country called zamlers, Yiddish for someone who collects things, also take donations and publicize the collection. They've now been sent materials from 26 states, he said.

Tinanoff has been told the archive is like an "old age home for Jewish records." He takes that as a compliment, and better than being compared to a funeral home. Still, he thinks of it more like an assisted living facility, he says, were the records aren't retired but getting a new life.

Nathan Tinanoff looks at one of the 16-inch records that holds an old Yiddish radio show for a Baltimore radio station, Aug. 24, 2006 in the Judacia Music Rescue Project library at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Fla. The archive at Florida Atlantic University has about 60,000 unique songs, many of them in Yiddish, and has become one of the largest repositories of Jewish music. (AP Photo/J. Pat Carter)

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