

Preserving The Jewish Sound

by STEWART AIN, Staff Writer *The Jewish Week*

BOCA RATON, Fla. — Ben Aroni placed a record needle on the 78 rpm in front of him. Noise, nothing but noise could be heard.

Moments later, a singer's voice pierced the static. It was that of his father, the late Zvee Aroni, a well-known East Coast cantor who as a child was known as the "Wonder Boy Cantor from Jerusalem." After about 20 seconds, Ben Aroni stopped the record, turned to the computer to his left, pushed some buttons and heard his father's voice again.

But this time, the computer had enhanced the sound digitally and filtered out some of the static. Aroni then pushed some more buttons and electronically removed the noise heard in the beginning of the record. "He could continue working on this to improve the quality even more, but there is a limit to how much time we want to spend on one record," said Nathan Tinanoff, director of the Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University here.

The archive began in 2002 and has so far collected between 40,000 and 50,000 records, many of them duplicates. For instance, it has 102 copies of "Roumania, Roumania" by Aaron Lebedoff, which was recorded in 1942 on Columbia Records. It is expected that volunteers will listen to all the duplicates, save the best two and trade the others with other institutions.

"Rescuing records is a major part of our mission," Tinanoff said. "We have 50 volunteers throughout the U.S. and Canada who are looking for recordings for us. ...The music is dead and we are honoring the families by bring it back."

Word of their collection is gradually spreading and he said he recently received a box of records from a rabbi in Manalapan, N.J., who got them from a congregant. In addition, the University of Central Florida in Orlando recently sent its entire collection of nearly 3,000 Jewish, the University of Nebraska sent its 2,000-record Jewish collection, and the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., donated more than 6,000 records it had acquired over the last 22 years. In each of these cases, the institutions either had run out of storage space or its mission had changed.

Tinanoff said it is hoped that the Judaica Sound Archives will eventually become a major center for the collection, preservation and digitization of Judaica sound. That includes anything Jewish or by Jewish artists. Thus, there are records of readings, poetry and comedy, in addition to such things as Yiddish, Israeli, cantorial, chasidic, popular Jewish songs and children's records.

Carl Rheins, executive director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, a Manhattan-based institution whose 23 million documents represents the largest Jewish archive in North America with an emphasis on the history and culture of Eastern Jews, said he welcomed FAU into the field of Judaica sound collection.

"There is room enough for all of us," he said. Rheins said YIVO has the second largest collection in North America of Jewish music, including LPs, sheet music, CDs; the largest is held by the University of Pennsylvania. And Rheins said YIVO has the largest collection of music of the Eastern European experience of the Jews, including socialist and Zionist folk songs, music from the Yiddish theater, and klezmer music. "We're in the midst of a technological revolution," he observed. "Technology is giving us the ability to preserve and transfer for future generations the Jewish musical experience" at a time of increased sensitivity to Jewish cultural history.

Tinanoff said FAU recently gave him about half of the fifth floor of its library here, enabling him to store perhaps 1 million records. In addition to collecting the records, the archive is also digitally recording them and putting them on the Internet. About 1,000 songs are now online at <http://faujsa.fau.edu> and by the end of the year that figure is expected to rise to 2,500, according to Maxine Schackman, the archives' assistant director.

"It has limited commercial value, but the emotional and historical value is invaluable," she said.

Because copyright laws prevent putting online recordings made after 1922 (the copyright doesn't expire until at least February 2067), the archive is able to put on the Web only material for which the copyright has been waived. That has been the case with the music of several cantors, as well as some Yiddish and children's records and the recently added music of Shimon & Ilana Gewirtz, known as The Balladeers.

In addition to the music, the Web site includes a scanned copy of the record labels, as well as directions on how best to ship recordings that people would like to donate. One of the oldest recordings in the FAU collection was recorded in September 1901 by Frank Seiden called "Min Hameizar Von Bimale" (From the Depths, a Flower). And the archives also has a Hebrew record by Seiden that was also recorded in 1901 called "Hamavdel."

To make available all of the copyrighted material the archives owns, Tinanoff said the Judaica Sound Archives plans to place computers at different locations that will be programmed to only access a special Web site that will contain all of this music. One of the first computers will be set up at the National Yiddish Book Center a year from now. "It will be an extension of our collection library," he said. "Eventually, we want the entire collection digitized, which would mean 60,000 songs available online."



Sounds of the past: Part of the Judaica Sound Archives collection.

Feb. 13, 2007