

Judaica Sound Archives Preserves Heritage

by ANNA KARAN
Summer Intern
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BOCA RATON, Fla. — Written on the album cover of his 1951 recording of synagogue melodies, Cantor Zvee Aroni of Philadelphia wrote, "We are a musical nation and a nation recognized as a people that likes, and appreciates and gives out music."

From David, a shepherd who later rose to become the Chief Musician in King Saul's Palace, to Jewish Prophets who became inspired upon hearing music, to the eventual creation of the Chazzan – in each generation, music has played an important role throughout Jewish history with each Jewish melody, in its own unique tune, embodying a theme of our past or present experiences.

Yet with time, thousands of these recorded sounds have been lost – and up until the spring of 2002, when Florida Atlantic University Libraries created the "Judaica Sound Archives" (JSA), many of the voices, songs and music captured on phonographs, tapes/CD's were forgotten in garages and attics throughout the country. JSA in turn created the "Judaica Music Rescue Project" with the goal of collecting Judaica sound recordings and sheltering them in a safe place where technology would prove 'instrumental' in preserving them.

The man who brought this project together, Nathan Tinanoff, became the part-time director of the archives project. Mr. Tinanoff was a senior IBM manager, overseeing software development/software system projects, when he began helping Cantor Asher Furman as he showed him how to use technology to preserve his collection of 1000 records. When Furman passed away, Tinanoff took it upon himself to initiate the Judaica Sound Archives Project.

Now, only five years later, the JSA has collected over 50,000 records and received on average 10,000 records a year.

"Our collection is now considered one of the largest in the world," says Tinanoff. "We have collecting agents in both the United States and Canada and always welcome donations of old records or LP's of Jewish plays, poetry, theatre or other performances in the various languages our people have expressed themselves in. A song, its composer and its performer are identified. Original phonograph disks are cleaned ultrasonically and then stored in protective sleeves."

JSA has an extensive website and now alongside the archive in Boca Raton, anyone can listen to these digitized treasures online. So far, the website has received hits from over 67 countries.

"One might say, the archive is almost like a Jewish I-tunes, except it's free," Tinanoff said. "It's entertaining and educational as each album offers a biography of the composer. But unlike I-tunes, one cannot yet download the musical selections."

When asked what her greatest reward has been so far in amassing the collection, Dr. Maxine Schackman, assistant director of JSA says, "A couple of years ago, we were given the opportunity to play music to Alzheimer's patients. Although they weren't able to remember what was going on at that moment, the music we played they remembered, and could even sing along to. As they listened, their eyes would close and some would even sway to its rhythm. It came back to them, and that's when you know you're doing something right."

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Dr. Maxine Schackman and Nathan Tinanoff are directing the Judaica Sound Archives Project at Florida Atlantic University.