

A few music menschen are rescuing Jewish music

By James D. Davis | Religion Editor
Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel
February 1, 2009



Nathan Tinanoff, the director and Maxine Schackman, the assistant director of the Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. (Carline Jean/Sun-Sentinel / January 23, 2009)

Maxine Schackman grew up with Jewish music always in her home in Brooklyn. When her parents died, she inherited perhaps 75 Jewish records.

And she threw them out.

"I thought of it as trash," Schackman says ruefully. "I was an American, and I wanted to look forward, not back. Only when I got older did I realize how important it was."

It's a mistake she tries to prevent others from making as assistant director of the Judaica Sound Archives at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

Founded in 2002 as the Judaica Music Rescue Project, JSA has the goal of cleaning, digitizing, cataloging and making this sonic heritage available to this and future generations.

Nowadays, whenever people clean out their parents' closets, they have a place to send all those records: 4,600 square feet of office and storage on the fifth floor of FAU's Wimberly Library. Arriving in great variety — LPs, cassettes and eight-track tapes, and 78 and 45 rpm vinyl discs — the collection forms the soundtrack of Jewry.

Along with 20 volunteers, the staff of three full-time and three part-time students collects Yiddish theater, Ladino pieces, children's songs, holiday pieces, even Broadway. It also includes music by the likes of Theodore Bikel and Barbra Streisand. And Borscht Belt stand-up by comedians like Fanny Brice and Shecky Greene.

There's Yiddish theater and love songs by Russian and Romanian immigrants. Songs by Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker. Broadcasts from Israel radio, dating as far back as 1959. The archivists also plan to catalog the Judaic portion of FAU's large jazz collection.

The oldest material goes back to 1901, and the oldest player in the archives was built in 1909.

"Jews were there from the beginning," director Nat Tinanoff says with pride.

More than 7,700 recordings are on JSA's Web site (faujsa.fau.edu/jsa), searchable by eight topics. Users can hear the recordings and see some information, although they can't download.

JSA doesn't study Jewish music itself, preferring just to furnish the raw materials for academic researchers. The staff has set up specialized workstations at 11 schools, including the University of Toronto, Gratz College near Philadelphia, American Jewish University near Los Angeles, and the ground floor of the Wimberly Library. Using a customized browser, the stations link to 15,000 songs, plus discographies and scans of the covers and inserts.

JSA also spreads the word with presentations around South Florida, especially at synagogues, Yiddish clubs and Hadassah chapters. Tinanoff remembers a question from an elderly woman: "Why are you doing this? My children don't care." His answer: "If we *don't* do it, your children and grandchildren won't have a *chance* to care."

Tinanoff came to the job in the opposite way from Schackman. Growing up in Baltimore, he didn't hear any Jewish music in his home except *My Yiddishe Mama*, sung by Connie Francis.

He did, however, have the systematic mind of a software developer at IBM. When the firm began moving workers out of Boca Raton, he chose early retirement, then began dabbling at FAU in family genealogy.

He learned of the university's Judaica collection and offered to help organize it. The work played to his strengths: He still has his baseball cards and *Lone Ranger* comics from boyhood.

"I've always been a collector and organizer, so I asked if I could help," he says, then smiles: "The rest is *bashert* [destiny]."

The work got early support from the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass. Besides its million volumes in the *mamaloshen*, or mother tongue, the center had 3,000 records — and donated them all to JSA.

Tinanoff went to Amherst to help in the arduous, two and a half-day shipping process. It involved wrapping each album in heavy tape, then putting it in a box full of foam peanuts, stacking the boxes on 11 shipping pallets, then shrink-wrapping each pallet.

"We were knee-deep in peanuts and bubble wrap," recalls Catherine Madsen, bibliographer for the book center. "Some of the 78s are very fragile."

JSA has also gotten sizable donations from eight other sites — including Save the Music in [San Diego](#), the [University of Central Florida](#) in Orlando, and Temple Emanu-El in Palm Beach — as well as families and individuals.

The archives have 60 volunteers called *zamlers* (Yiddish for "honored collectors") around the country, keeping an eye out for anyone who wants to donate. All the efforts have yielded 10,000 recordings per year for the last five years.

"There's not a day that something doesn't arrive," Schackman says.

Most new records go to FAU's Digital Library, where the covers are scanned and the music is recorded as MP3 files. The easiest are CDs, which are already digitized. Hardest are the 78s, which are often worn and noisy.

Those go to Ben Roth, JSA's sound archivist, for a variety of rescue tools. One is a rounded playback stylus, which avoids the worst of the noise at the bottom of the groove.

Roth also records in stereo, although each record is monaural; then he can delete the noisier channel.

Then Roth uses special software with options like "Click and Crackle removal." Finally, he takes a sample of the disc's surface noise and subtracts it from the whole recording.

Some of the material may raise eyebrows, like *White Christmas*, written by Jewish composer [Irving Berlin](#). JSA even has six versions of *Ave Maria* performed by Jews.

The archivists admit they had a long discussion on what to include — an issue perhaps sharpened because they don't analyze the materials themselves. They finally resolved to keep everything they got.

"We decided we'd never define Jewish music to satisfy the generalists *and* the purists," Schackman says. "Jews come from many nationalities, and we're not collecting for our own tastes."

"Besides, these are historical artifacts."

Despite all the technology, the JSA people plan to keep all the old media. That amounts to more than 8,700 LPs, 1,500 cassettes, 205 45 rpm records, 125 eight-track tapes and 547 CDs. And the number rises almost daily.

Some people have asked why the archives keep them all, when the digital recordings take a fraction of the space. Schackman's answer: No telling what media will pop up in the future.

"For all we know, something will surpass MP3s," Schackman says. "When it does, we'll have the source materials."

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Preserved recordings

Some of the rarer recordings in the archive at FAU:

160 single-sided records from before 1910, four of Yiddish comedian Frank Seiden from 1901

435 recordings from *Vistas of Israel* produced by the Jewish state between 1959 and 1963

Three 10-inch Edison records, each a quarter-inch thick, produced in 1910 or earlier

Seven Sephardic 78s, from 1907 to 1913

If you go

The Jewish Sound Archive is in the Wimberly Library at FAU's Boca Raton campus, 777 Glades Road. Phone: 561-297-0080 .

A research station is on the first floor of the Wimberly Library. Users register with a librarian, then borrow headphones or bring their own.