FAU archivist restores vintage children’s records damaged in Superstorm Sandy

By Scott Travis staff writer

A pile of stained, mildewed debased from Superstorm Sandy has turned into a nostalgic treasure for Florida Atlantic University.

A collection of 78 vintage children’s records including “The Little Engine That Could” and “Black Beauty” were inside a Long Island garage when the hurricane hit last October. The recordings, mostly 78 rpm, appear to be damaged due to heat and mold as the records and contents on their jackets. But FAU has found a way to bring the stories and music back to life.

The Recorded Sound Archives at the Massey Library on the university’s Boca Raton campus has embarked on a project to clean and repair the damaged records and digitize them and their contents to an online collection, something that requires both modern computer software and old-fashioned, customized elements.

“Well, these archivists are working with such rare and wonderful materials,” said FAU archivist Benjamin Roth, a staff archivist at the Recorded Sound Archives, during a brief outtake from the 1920s.

**Restoration operation**

The process that will be used at Florida Atlantic University’s Recorded Sound Archives on the damaged records:

- A technician cleans the 78 rpm using a special ultrasonic machine similar to units used to clean jewelry. Coated water and a small amount of jet-grit dry ice are used.
- If the disc is excessive, the record is hand-washed. A hair dryer is used to dry it.
- The record is then digitized, using a special digital turntable that digitizes the record and converts the audio onto a computer sound card. Sony Sound Forge is then used to eliminate white noise, pops and other surface noise.
- The album jacket and any accompanying books or cutouts are photographed. Adobe Photoshop is used to remove any dirt or deformities.
- The audio clip and album art are cataloged.

The sound archives started in the fall with a Jupiter Collection of vintage works by Jewish artists, with the group expanded into other genres, including jazz and children’s recordings, after the donation of 60,000 records from the family of the late Jack Joel, a Boca Raton attorney. The collection included 550 children’s records, all in good condition, according to Joel.


When a tidal surge from the superstorm brought 20 inches of water into a family garage on Long Island, hundreds of recordings stunned those lost practically all of their value in the collector’s market.

The Boca Raton-based archivists were thrilled. The collection represents a period in American culture, mostly the 1920s and 1930s, when vinyl replaced the hard shell of the phonograph. The records became collectible for audiophiles and were not as friendly since it has passed over the years.

The works also represent a period before many families had television sets, and when children’s records were a popular form of entertainment.

“For a certain time in history that won’t ever be re-created,” said Roth. “This was the age of innocence. These were very simple then, more innocent.”

[Bio: Scott Travis]

See RECORDS, 12A

Hear for yourself

To listen to some of these classic children’s records, go to SunSentinel.com/music/records

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from the 20th Century.” said Michael Schuback, director of the sound archives. “I can’t wait to try out the machine when we are able to share our work online.”

The website likely will be created in November Schuback said. Researchers, students and others interested will be able to access the digital database of the recordings via FAU’s computer software and password restrictions that are necessary due to copyright.

Most of the records are of hits and popular culture classics, including “Little Brown Jug” “Peter Rabbit” and “Mary Poppins.” While some combine stories and songs, some records only have the American Folk Songs and “Alphabet Songs.”

The collection is a unique array of Christmas-themed records as well as children’sessional cards. A 1920s record called “Little Song from Big Sweeney” includes a gentle call for racial equality.

You can get good professionals from a brown-almond ooz. The collection you don’t want to move‘net matter where you are going to go. The records were donated in April by Peter Middletun who FAU officials call the world’s leading expert on children’s music records. Middletun, who was raised in the country and couldn’t be reached by the time the Sentinel’s editorial decision was being held back. He has been a lifelong collector and started scoring some of the kiddies records only in 1989 after seeing one on a local second-hand store and remembering it from his childhood.

He then took “want to buy” ads in antique newspapers, called antique dealers and flipped through magazines and was sprawled with responses.

“People had these records sitting in their attics and basements but didn’t know what to do with them,” Middletun writes on his website. “There was no established hobby yet.”

Due to mold and mildew damage, the archive is dis- carding many of the story books and paper labels that accompanied the recordings and was alerted by Schuback that photographs of the printed matter are being taken and will be digitized and restored using Adobe Photoshop. Almost all of the records are salvageable, Schuback said. Some are warped, and many are covered with mud and must be washed by hand.

To help with the restoration, the archive department has bought a steel rolling flatbed, a device that slowly levels the recording between heavy metal plates. The department also has software that can reduce background noise and dust old tracks.

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