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Archive Watch: Cantors and Klezmer Go Digital

By Jennifer Howard

Between the early 1990s and 2002, Florida Atlantic University's Wimberly Library acquired about a thousand recordings of Jewish music. In 2002 that collection became the foundation for the Judaica Music Rescue Project, founded by Nathan Tinanoff, with the goal of creating a central repository for Judaic sound recordings. In 2005 the project was renamed the [Judaica Sound Archives](#), with Mr. Tinanoff as director. It now contains about 58,000 recordings. In the last half-decade, the project has been receiving material at the rate of more than 10,000 recordings a year. Mr. Tinanoff and the archives' assistant director, Maxine Schackman, jointly answered questions about about it via e-mail.

Q. What kinds of recordings do you seek out?

A. The JSA accepts any recording of Jewish music. The JSA collects recordings that reflect Jewish culture including: folk, cantorial, comedy, theater, Chassidic, klezmer, Israeli, Sephardic, and songs for children as well as recordings of Jewish music and humor in any language. The JSA accepts recordings of music by Jewish performers, composers, and conductors, even if the content is NOT Jewish. The JSA accepts recordings even if it already has a copy in the collection. Multiple copies allow us to find the best quality and least-worn recordings for digitization.

Q. How much of the collection has been digitized?

A. Approximately 25 percent.

Q. How much is publicly available?

A. Approximately 45 percent of these digitized recording are on our public Web site.

Q. How do people gain access to and use the collection online?

A. Because so many of the recordings in the JSA collection are under copyright protection, it was important to develop special software so that researchers, teachers, and students of Judaic music, history, and culture could have wider access than the general public. Digitized music files (both under copyright and in the public domain) on the JSA-RS [the Judaica Sound Archives Research Station] can be heard in their entirety. Record-label scans and album-cover scans are also provided. Music cannot be downloaded from JSA-RS.

Q. Are there unique challenges in building an archive like this one?

A. In 2002, when we set out to create a large, centralized repository for Judaic sound recordings from the early 20th century, we could not have imagined the vibrant, growing, multifaceted JSA that exists today. From the beginning, our goal has been to encourage everyone with Judaic sound recordings to contribute to the rescue effort. Our greatest challenge has been getting the word out so that it becomes general knowledge that we are seeking out these materials. Building our Web site and the JSA Research Station has been a major technical challenge requiring tireless efforts and ongoing support by our Web-site development team. We are grateful that so many performers have been gracious enough to grant us permission to have their music on our Web site. We are always seeking out more performers who want to share their music with the world. Outreach presentations for local clubs and organizations, tours of the JSA, and our newly established [blog](#) are some of the ways we try to reach a wide and varied audience.

Q. How do you sustain the archives financially?

A. William Miller, dean of FAU Libraries, and Rita Pellen, associate dean of FAU Libraries, have been staunch supporters of the JSA since its outset. The JSA is an integral part of FAU Libraries, which provides for our basic operating expenses. The JSA is also dependent on financial donations from supporters.

Q. What happens next?

A. The JSA is growing both in terms of size and scope. We have recently acquired an enormous number of recordings from the estate of the late Jack Saul [a Cleveland-based music collector who left behind as many as 150,000 records at his death; 12,000 of them went to the JSA]. It will take us a year to completely process all these recordings plus the usual 10,000 recordings we receive each year from other sources. We are continuing to develop and improve the JSA Research Station by making it more flexible and convenient for instructors and students to use. The new JSA blog allows us to use the blogosphere to reach an ever-widening audience. The Judaica Sound Archives is providing content to people around the world, many of whom have thanked us for sharing these cultural treasures. What happens next is that we continue to do that and do it better.