



The Beat

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From Obsession to Archive

Fan Donates World's Largest Privately Held Jazz Record Collection to Oberlin

"This will never happen again."

So said Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers, when he first laid eyes on the record collection of James Neumann—considered to be the largest archive of jazz ever amassed by a private individual. And that was in the late 1990s; it's grown since then. The score presently stands at 76,000 long-playing records, another 15,000 78 rpm discs, CDs in numbers that have yet to be counted and a deep well of jazz memorabilia.

A decade ago, at 61 years old, Neumann began to hear the whispers of mortality, which one day would command him to give up his spiritual quest, thus jeopardizing something that had acquired a life of its own. So he began preparing for the future.

Morgenstern appraised the value of the collection, but Neumann found few takers when it came to adopting such a formidable child. Rutgers, for instance, demurred because its collection is already mature. The one institution to raise its hand was Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, which Neumann had attended (class of '58).

Ten years ago, Oberlin lacked the space to house the collection. With the construction of the Phyllis Litoff Building, however, which begins this spring and is expected to open in the fall of 2009, the collection will finally have a home, complete with a full-time curator. The Neumann collection seems likely to make Oberlin one of the largest resources for jazz research in America.



James and Susan Neumann with part of their jazz record collection

MARK SHELDON

For the present, however, it all still resides in Neumann's home in Chicago's northern suburbs, as well as a warehouse in Chicago. To walk among the neatly stocked shelves in his house—nearly 600 feet of them—and let your fingers ripple along the spines of the records is to touch an orderly procession of first editions from all eras of recorded jazz, from the early 78 rpm Gennetts of King Oliver and Bix Beiderbecke to the early Transition LPs of Cecil Taylor and John Coltrane from the 1950s. Everything from 10-inch "X" LPs (among the first serious reissue efforts from a major label) to the rarest Norgrens and Clefs with their impulsive David Stone Martin cover art is there. Many are originals, and each is

encoded with the invisible imprint of its moment, a phenomenon that, with a bit of imagination and projection, brings one nearer to the spiritual presence of the artist.

Neumann, now 71, first ventured into a Chicago record store in the late 1940s. The LP had recently arrived and the 45 soon followed. But the 78 was still the way most people bought their music. Like his young peers, Neumann grew up on the pop music of the time. Then came his moment of enlightenment.

"I was starting high school around 1950," he said. "The first piece that excited me was [guitarist] Johnny Smith's 'Moonlight In Vermont.' A neighbor who played guitar and liked jazz played it for me. It gave me goose

pimples. I didn't know what jazz was. Then he played me this thing by Count Basie. It immediately caught me emotionally."

Using his income from a paper route and delivering chop suey, he began scouring for jazz records throughout the city, feeding his habit at Chicago's then-thriving music retailers and some out-of-the-way spots.

"I found records by going out to every second-hand store I could find, every Salvation Army store," Neumann said. "When Goldblatt's department store sold off their record department for 97 cents each I was there early in the morning. Most of it was opportunistic situations."

Neumann divides his early years into his "college era," "army era" and "bachelor era." "That was when I became a serious collector," he said. "By the time I met and married my wife, Susan, she probably realized there was something strange about me. I probably had about 4,000 records at that time, around 1967."

By then Neumann began to realize that a record was a form of global currency negotiable anywhere without conversion. "Japanese collectors became a big area for trading," he said, recalling the '60s and '70s. "They were dying for certain American issues that were easy to find in second-hand stores here. I built a separate library of duplicates for trading. One American LP might be worth two or three Japanese LPs, and so on. It became a pyramid."

Of the roughly 76,000 LPs he now owns, about 20,000 are duplicates reserved for trading.

Under the cover of scouting import opportunities for the family business, a successful lighting fixture company, he foraged record stores and street vendors across Europe and Asia, scoring rare Warner Marsh, Jackie McLean and boxes of out-of-print Prestige LPs from a Venice street merchant.

What's the most valuable item in the collection? Neumann can't say. "I don't look at value in terms of dollars," he said, not being ingenuous. Not being in the business of selling records, to him a record has value only in relation to another record. Another reason is the sheer fluidity of value. Yesterday's prized collectors items can become today's junkers.

None of this concerns Neumann, though, whose collection seems to have avoided any particular generational allegiance. Most private collections dwell in a favored period. They trade breadth for depth. Neumann is unique—he has taken in everything. Between 1977 and 1985, he even ran his own label, Bee Hive Records, which produced about 18 albums. Clint Eastwood chose four Johnny Hartman Bee Hive tunes for the soundtrack of *The Bridges of Madison County*.

"You can't cut off the periphery of jazz, even though it doesn't swing or follow a chord line," Neumann said. "There's still a spirit of creativity to new music that is important to keep alive."

This is what has made his collection, which also includes a vast library of jazz literature (including fiction), periodicals, autographs and memorabilia so valuable to Oberlin, which expects to absorb it in stages over several years beginning in late 2009, when it will enter the hands of David Stull, dean of the Oberlin Conservatory.

"We're focused first and foremost on using the collection to support our performance training program," Stull said. "When students are rehearsing or jamming, they will be able to turn to their laptops and pull up anyone from Bix Beiderbecke to Miles Davis, wherever they are and listen."

To make this happen, Oberlin plans to begin a vast digitization effort.

"We'll bring the LPs in first," Stull said. "Our object is to create the largest online jazz archive in the world. We'll be photographing the jacket art, notes and even the record itself. Digitizing the music will have to be done in real time. Even with multiple recording stations, we expect this will take years to complete, perhaps two decades."

To conform to still-evolving online copyright laws, Stull emphasizes that the content will be available for listening, not for downloads. Access will require a password, and only one recording will be streamed at a time. Initial indexing will be by the catalog number on the LP, which will pull up the tunes, artists, dates and other basic information. Over time other search tools will be added.

"All the original recordings will be preserved and accessible by special request," Stull said. "But by digitizing all the elements, the content can be made available and even electronically displayed on large LCD screens throughout the building without degrading the originals. Small parts of the collection will also be displayed as historical artifacts on a rotating basis. But our primary object is to digitize the content and make it available as part of an even larger center for American music."

Stull said that the Oberlin Conservatory Library is among the top five in the nation, with about 90,000 recordings from the Western canon and jazz. With the addition of the Neumann collection, it will more than double in terms of volume. The increase in actual content remains to be seen, however, since many of the same performances undoubtedly exist in 78, 45, LP and CD formats as reissues.

Meanwhile, Neumann has not lost his acquisitive itch. The fact that he would need another 90 years to hear what he's already gathered does not phase him. He still searches, shops and trades. No particular object of desire pops to mind when asked. But he'll know it when he sees it.

"Collecting is a natural instinct, something you can't control," Neumann said. "Being so anxious to have a complete collection is such a motivating force." —John McDonough

Riffs



Cecilia Smith

Tri-C Scores: Cuyahoga Community College (Tri-C) in Cleveland received \$50,000 from the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation for the commission of a new jazz score by vibraphonist Cecilia Smith.

Details: tri-c.edu

IAJE Departure: Bill McFarlin stepped down as executive director of IAJE on Jan. 28. He has been named executive vice president of Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Michigan. Vivian Orndorff and Steve Baker are conducting the organization's day-to-day operations.

Details: iaje.org

New Detroit Club: Gretchen Valade's Dirty Dog Jazz Café supper club opened Feb. 13 in Detroit's Grosse Pointe Farms commercial district. Valade, who owns Mack Avenue Records, also helps fund the Detroit Jazz Festival.

Details: dirtydogjazz.com

Guitar Prescription: Guitarist John Duck has launched "Dr. Duck's Guitar Prescription Radio Show." The nationally syndicated show focuses on discussing the guitar with historical perspectives and trivia. Radio station KUNV in Las Vegas co-produces the program.

Details: ducksdeluxe.com

Arizonans Honored: Jazz In Arizona presented Lifetime Achievement Awards to vocalist Margo Reed and pianist Charles Lewis. The awards were presented in conjunction with the organization's 30th anniversary celebration on Dec. 16, 2007. Details: jazzinaz.org

Miles From India: New York's Town Hall will premiere Bob Belden's *Miles From India: Celebrating The Works Of Miles Davis* on May 9. Artists scheduled to play at the concert include Ron Carter, Lenny White and Badal Roy.

Details: townhall-nyc.org