The James and Susan Neuman Jazz Collection

The love that James Neumann '58 of Chicago has for jazz is manifest in a collection of more than 100,000 recordings and a vast array of posters, ephemera, and iconography. It is believed to be the largest privately held collection in the United States—some say the world—and he and his wife, Susan, are giving it to Oberlin, where it will have pride of place in the Bertram and Judith Kohl Building.

According to Dean of the Conservatory David H. Stull, items from the collection will begin making their journey to Oberlin sometime during the summer of 2010.

"This will never happen again." That's what Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, told John McDonough, who interviewed him about the collection for Downbeat magazine. Morgenstern's prediction stemmed from his reaction to seeing the Neumann collection of recordings for the first time, in all its glory, in the late 1990s. As McDonough reported, the collection now weighs in at some 76,000 long-playing records, 15,000 78 rpm discs, untold CDs, and "a deep well of jazz memorabilia."

The fact of the collection's existence is as much cultural marker as it is historical artifact.

Jim Neumann was a 14-year-old science buff and self-proclaimed "baseball fanatic" growing up in Chicago, Illinois, when a neighbor who played guitar had him listen to a recording of Johnny Smith’s "Moonlight in Vermont." It was the first jazz record Jim had ever heard, and he was hooked. "Nothing was better than that," he says. "I gave up baseball quick."

A biology major at Oberlin, Jim was a mover and shaker in the Jazz Club, where he booked such acts as Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, Woody Herman, Count Basie, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Duke Ellington, and Stan Kenton. A radio program of his on WOBC, "Jazz Hot and Cool," allowed him to tape interviews with some of his idols. He began acquiring autographs, recordings, and memorabilia, simply because he loved everything to do with jazz.

By the time Jim graduated from Oberlin, married, and joined his father's Chicago business, New Metal Crafts, Inc. (a fine-lighting products manufacturer that rigged out all of the lighting at Disneyland Resort Paris), his avocation as a collector was established. Worldwide travels on behalf of New Metal Crafts (he is the company's president) enabled him to "feed his love of jazz" and allowed him to live his dreams, scouting out hole-in-the-wall record shops in far-flung locales and adding such
extremely rare items to his cache as the Swedish program for a 1939 Duke Ellington performance in Stockholm. A particular trove was a large collection of recordings impossible to obtain in the U.S. that Jim discovered in Genoa. The shop owner had protected his stock in underground caves during World War II.

From 1977 to 1985, Jim and Susan were record producers. Bee Hive Records' greatest claim to fame was a Grammy nomination for Johnny Hartman's album Once in Every Life. Songs from the album were featured in the film The Bridges of Madison County.

Jim's first choice for a repository had always been Oberlin. "I wanted the collection to remain in the Midwest," he says. "I'm proud to be a graduate of Oberlin ... proud of Oberlin's spirit, history, and the conservatory's great reputation. My hope for this collection at Oberlin is that it enhances the school as a center for scholarly work. If you want to understand the history of jazz performance, you'll want to come to Oberlin."

The James and Susan Neumann Jazz Collection will be archived in a space specifically designed to protect it and to provide resources to digitally preserve it over time. "Listening to the definitive recordings by the great jazz artists is essential to a complete education," says Stull. "This collection, in conjunction with digital access, will provide our students with an unparalleled resource dedicated to supporting their evolution as performers. The recordings will be available from anywhere on campus, including all of the spaces within the new building. This is an exceptional gift from Jim, and we are enormously grateful to be the beneficiaries of such an important collection."

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