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UCSB Library Receives Grant to Catalog Rare Sound Recording Collections

In the early 1950's, record dealer Edouard Pecourt opened a shop in Paris called La Boîte à Disques, where he amassed an extraordinary collection of vintage musical recordings. When he moved to Portland, Ore., in 1986, he packed up his entire collection -- four shipping containers in all -- and brought it with him. When he passed away in 2008, the UC Santa Barbara Library acquired Pecourt's collection, which included thousands of wax cylinders and an even greater number of 78-rpm discs.

Meanwhile, in the 1970's, folklorist Bruce Bastin established a record company called Interstate Music to reissue important but obscure folk, jazz, country, blues, and ethnic recordings. In doing so, he, too, amassed a vast collection of 78-rpm discs. Five years ago, the UCSB Library acquired a portion of his holdings, which consists of ethnic and folk recordings from Latin America and Europe, as well as recordings in popular traditions such as Argentine tangos.

Now, with a grant of nearly \$240,000 from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), David Seubert, acting director of the UCSB Library's Department of Special Collections, is overseeing the process of cataloging the roughly 18,000 discs from the Pecourt and Bastin holdings, which comprise about 10 percent of the library's sound recording collection. Also to be cataloged are smaller groups, such as

the Roberto Eyzaguirre set of Peruvian 78-rpms.

The recordings are from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, France, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, and Spain, and date from 1900 to 1960. "We're going to catalog everything that's in French, Spanish, and Portuguese," said Seubert. "We did a preliminary search on OCLC, a worldwide database of library collections, and found that 94 percent of the material we're going to catalog is not in the database at all. So all of this will be new to all but the most tenacious researchers."

The grant is part of CLIR's Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives award program. Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, it supports the identification and cataloging of special collections and archives of high scholarly value that are difficult or impossible to locate. "No other public archive in the U.S. has a similar quantity of European and Latin American recordings of popular, vernacular, and ethnic music from the first decades of the recording industry," said Seubert. "These key resources are important to an increasingly global and interdisciplinary scholarly community, where historical recordings are used in the study of a variety of disciplines in the humanities."

The Bastin collection came to the UCSB Library when Bastin shut down his record label and put his inventory on the market. "We ended up acquiring all of his Latin American and Iberian recordings -- Argentine, Brazilian, Spanish, Portuguese, Caribbean, and Mexican," Seubert recalled. "I don't remember the exact number of discs, but there were 6,000 to 8,000."

The Pecourt collection was acquired quite serendipitously. "I heard through the grapevine that Pecourt had a large collection of French wax cylinders that might be of interest to us," Seubert said. "So I flew up to his home in Portland. The cylinders were in huge stacks of boxes in the dining room. While I was there, I noticed the garage was full of disc records. I asked to look through them, and I found a huge number of early French recordings that we didn't have in our collection. So we acquired those as well, and now they're here."

Cataloging these two giant collections is a huge undertaking, but also essential to make the recordings available to faculty members, students, and the public. "This project is the perfect fit for the CLIR grant program," Seubert said.

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