Collector is a 'Reel' man

Recording engineer plans museum for reel to reels

by Jim Swift

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"Astor is Odessa became essential to my recording," he said. "Before I used to record this rock band at this club and I could not hear myself on those big headphones. And they said, 'Why don't you use your equipment and not your nose and set up an equipment over there."

I did and I went, 'Brook!' And I bought a van and we customized it for recording and lined it made a big difference.

The editorial

Perhaps the most significant contribution made by reel to reels, though, was their editing abilities. For the first time, an engineer could manipulate the recording process. Instead of editing a recording over from scratch because the bend made a mistake, the tape could be quickly and easily cut and spliced.

So recording costs diminished and consumers repaid the rewards.

Meanwhile, events were taking shape that would determine Thespis' life work.

The move

Because I was doing recordings for the college," said Thespis, "I picked up a do - in - location recording for Austin Custom Resume.

"And I went to work also for the state and they sent me to Austin for a month's training and I knew this was Mosca and I had to be in there.

By 1979, Thespis had packed up his Highend Sound Company and moved it to the Capital City. It was the heyday of the early Austin music scene. The famous Armstrong and Bassett left major brands and the fans who loved them from all over the world. Smaller music venues were popping up all over town.

"The music was what I really did," Thespis said, "I had it all to know what was going on at the Armadillo. I go to see Jimmy Clinton at his last concert when he came into the Armadillo and was almost done.

"And I knew that I was going to be doing recording. It would be a fun place. My first on-location recording in Austin was the original Antenna's outfit at Anderson Lane.

Two years later the Armadillo was history, but Thespis was here to stay and he resumed his recording company, Phantom Productions.

The wife

Along the way, he got married. And his new wife, Chris, jumped jumping, not just into the marriage, but into the business. She became a manager for bands and used Phantom Productions to create recordings she used to advance her clients' interests with record executives and venues.

In 1987, the couple started a new commercial music program for Austin Community College.

"The idea," said Thespis, "was to help musicians in Austin obtain some business sense about the industry they were in.

The program, now called, "ACC Music Business, Performance and Technology," is still serving that purpose.

The gift

Then, in 1999, everything changed. Chris gave her husband a gift: a working 1944 Edison Cylinder Player. As he pulled a wax cylinder from his box, a little mechanism, and wound up the machine, his mind drifted back over the decades of his life as an recording engineer.

He thought of all the reel to reel tape recorders he had used and sold and of the dozens more he had wanted to try. One look at her husband and Chris knew the Edision was about all the laboring. Their collecting.

The collection

"These things really do need to be preserved," said Thespis, glazing around at the 152 reel that now sits on the wire rack in every room on the second floor of the couple's Austin studio home, "and there's not many people preserving them."

"We were just in the Grammy Museum," there are no reel-to-reel tape recorders there. We were in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame." There are only a few tape recorders there and whether you can see them depends on the display.

"Magnetic recording enabled video. It enabled so many things in our life for as being able to hear good quality sound and see so many of these things going into light and film."

"Indeed, it is not like you can just cut out and buy a new reel to reel tape recorder. As new technologies arrived and as video moved forward and center in the recording industry, manufacturers just stopped making them.

"Right now, the only reel-to-real recorder that you can get built is the Otari," Thespis said. "And I told them to a few months a few months ago they still going to build an Otari for you for recording for radio station. It's something like $8,000, custom. But that's only the way you can get a new machine now."

The tapes

As the reel-to-reel disappeared, the tape they once played sputtered in streets, basements and homes. Now, they are vanishing, taking with them important parts of our history.

"I just recently recovered a tape from my grandfather singing to Scottish songs," Thespis recalled. "Like I heard forever."

But the machines and the tapes are not alone in their disappearing acts. Along with the machines, people like Robert M. Meier, who wears an apron for a reel to reel machine that allowed users to use the tape to tap in songs and augmented music in the opposite direction.

The document

Determined to preserve Margery's legacy, Martin and Chris traveled to Los Angeles to interview the man.

"It's BS," Thespis said, "Wearing looking like people that because like it's just a lot of people, these people that companies right after World War II and these looking like these looking being, [cough]."

The interview will eventually be available for viewing online. Meanwhile, online viewers can already watch the video from the Howlin' Seven, a documentary video produced by Phantom Productions and formerly Phantom Productions. The show also includes additional interactive content on their website that includes dozens of ideas and gets more than 1 million hits per month from over 200 countries.

The museum

Both the home collection, along with a collection of more than 50 vintage microphones, and hundreds of manuals, photographs and magazines, is still stuck in the couple's house, unavailable to the public. That, Martin and Chris, agree, has got to change.

So they embarked on the notion of an Austin-based museum to be called the, "Museum of Magnetic Sound Recording." They recruited a board and secured start-up money.

And as logical for them, their dream got bigger still.

What we need is a Texas Media Museum and this is where I'm trying to move this museum that would celebrate music and recording. It would celebrate broadcast; I would celebrate interactive games; I would celebrate film and cinematic arts; I would celebrate music and music."

"And if I can put together a world-class music museum that something like this, that would be a destination."

Is that possible? For a texan that swapped up a portable transistor reel-to-reel tape machine to visit the world exhibit with music, anything is possible.