

*Collector is a 'Reel' man
Recording engineer plans museum for reel to reels*

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The image is a screenshot of a news website article. At the top left, there is a navigation bar with the 'kxan.com' logo and the tagline 'IN-DEPTH. INVESTIGATIVE'. Below the logo are links for 'News', 'Weather', 'Investigations', 'Report It', and 'Video'. To the right of the navigation bar is a portrait of a man with a white beard and glasses, wearing a suit and tie, identified as 'Jim Swift'. Below the portrait is a 'Video' button with a play icon. The main content area shows a video player with a thumbnail image of a reel-to-reel tape recorder. A yellow box with the text 'SEND ME NO FLOWERS' is visible on the tape recorder. A blue banner at the bottom of the video player reads 'kxan A REEL MAN' with a timestamp '10:09 56' and 'NEW @ 10'. At the bottom of the video player are standard video controls: a play button, a volume icon, a progress bar, and buttons for 'Share', 'Expand', and a full-screen icon.

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Jim Swift

AUSTIN (KXAN) - Try to imagine this: You're a young man driving a daily magazine distribution route between remote towns in the emptiness of far West Texas.

You'd like to punctuate the boredom with some tunes, but available AM radio reception can be spotty, at best.

There is no such thing as eight-track tape players, let alone audio cassettes, CDs or iPods. And obviously, there is no way to slap a vinyl record on a turntable in a moving vehicle.

But back in the early 1960s, Martin Theophilus really, really, really wanted some music on the road. So he turned to something new: A portable, transistor reel-to-reel stereo tape recorder/player. Loneliness was conquered.

The prom

But that was just the beginning. At a high school prom, Theophilus

noticed someone was recording the band as it played music for the kids. Intrigued, he got to know the band leader and over the ensuing summer, they experimented with recording techniques.

Then, as a student at Sul Ross State College (now Sul Ross State University) in Alpine, Theophilus took charge of the audio department equipment and the experiments continued.

"I tried to buy Sony out there and nobody was selling Sony," he said. "So I wrote Sony Superscope and got a letter back from Fred Tushinsky, which now I realize was the vice president of Sony, who said, 'I'll set you up. I'll get you a dealership out of Midland and you can sell our equipment in Alpine.'"

The youngster took the bait.

"So I sold Sony equipment -- but it was mostly to me with the discount," he laughed.

Meanwhile, Theophilus was busy innovating.

The bar

"A bar in Odessa became essential to my recording," he said, "because I tried 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 take your equipment and run your snake out and set it up in our equipment van?'

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

The edit

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 starting a recording over from scratch because the band made a mistake, the tape could be quickly and easily cut and spliced.

So recording costs diminished and consumers reaped the rewards.

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

The move

Because I was doing recordings for the college," said Theophilus, "I got picked up to do on-location recording for Austin Custom Records.

"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 Mecca and I had to be here."

By 1978, Theophilus had packed up his Highland Sound Company and moved it to the Capital City. It was the heyday of the early Austin music scene. The famed Armadillo World Headquarters was attracting major bands 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 wanted to do," Theophilus said, "and I had the ability to see what was going on at the Armadillo. I got to see Harry Chapin, his last concert when he came into the Armadillo before it closed down.

“And I knew that if I was going to be doing recording, it would be a fun place. My first on-location recording in Austin was the original Antone's out on Anderson Lane.”

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

The wife

Along the way, he got married. And his new wife, Chris, jumped headlong, 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 work on a commercial music program for Austin Community College .

“The idea,” said Theophilus,” 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 1904 Edison Cylinder Player . As he pulled a wax cylinder from its box, slipped it onto the mechanism, and wound up the machine, his mind drifted back over the decades of his life as a recording engineer.

He thought of all the reel to reel tape recorders he had used and lost and of the dozens more he had always wanted to try.

One look at her husband and Chris knew the Edison was about to alter their lives. The collecting began.

The collection

“These things really do need to be preserved,” said Theophilus, gazing around at the 152 reel to reels that now line the walls from floor to ceiling in every room on the second floor of the couple’s Bastrop County 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 four 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 as far as being able to hear good quality sounds and I am sad to see so many of these units going into landfills.”

Indeed, it’s not like you can just go out and buy a new reel to reel tape recorder. As new technologies arrived and as video moved front and center in the recording industry, manufactures just stopped making them.

“Right now the only reel-to-reel recorder that you can get built is the Otari,” Theophilus said. “And I talked to them a few months ago and they're still going to build an Otari for you for recording for a radio station. It's something like \$7,000, custom-build. But that's the only way you can get a new machine now.”

The tapes

As the reel to reels disappeared, the tapes they once played languished in attics, closets and basements. Now they, too, are vanishing, taking with them important parts of our history.

“I just recently recovered a tape from my grandfather singing his Scottish songs,” Theophilus recalled, “like I hadn't heard forever.”

But the machines and the tapes are not alone in their disappearing acts. Also going are the people who first created them: people like Robert G. Metzger, who patented a dial for a reel to reel machine that allowed users to set a time for the tape to stop and then start again in the opposite direction.

The documentary

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

“He's 95,” Theophilus said. “We're losing people like that because it's just like; a lot of these people started these companies right after World War II and we're losing them like we're losing vets, really.”

The interview will eventually be available for viewing online. Meanwhile, online viewers can already watch the trailer from a three DVD, seven-hour documentary video produced by Phantom and purchase segments . The Theophiluses also created an educational Web site that boasts 12,300 entries and gets more than 1 million hits per month from over 200 countries.

The museum

But the machine collection, along with a collection of more than 100 vintage microphones, and hundreds of ads, 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 started looking for money.

And as is typical for them, their dreams got bigger still.

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

"And I think if Austin could put together a world-class museum that did something like that, it would be a destination."

Is that possible? For a teenager that snapped up a portable transistor reel-to-reel tape machine to fill the vast West Texas void with music, anything is possible.