

A LOCAL TREASURE: THE PARAMOUNT LIBRARY OF POPULAR MUSIC

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Few people know that the Paramount Theatre houses a huge collection of popular music: more than 100,000 titles, possibly the third-largest of its kind in the United States (after the Library of Congress and UCLA collections).

Name any genre of music that existed before the rock and roll era, and chances are you'll find it there, in quantity: waltzes, rags, polkas, tangos, silent film music, sentimental ballads, foxtrots in all their varieties, big band jazz. Classics by the likes of Johann Strauss, Scott Joplin, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers share quarters with songs long-forgotten. The library's "founding father," Jack Bethards, spent years assembling a collection of 75,000 titles, which he presented to the Paramount in 1987, joining it to the 13,000-title Curt Massey Library of radio orchestra music, which had been donated to the Paramount in 1974. Massey's collection had never been touched. It sat upstairs, waiting for a caretaker to appear.

Enter Jean Cunningham. She had been the librarian for the Oakland Symphony. When it went bankrupt in 1986, the city took over its assets, retaining its library in the city-owned Paramount. At the time Bethards donated his collection, Cunningham was asked to become curator of the enormous volume of music now assembled under one roof. She accepted, without knowing quite what she was getting into, and set to work with the help of a few dedicated volunteers.

Then the Loma Prieta earthquake hit, littering the floor knee-deep with vintage music. Cunningham and the volunteers spent eight months carefully sorting and reshelving. Since then, many thousands of additional items have been donated. The new acquisitions have highlighted the library's main problem: how to make this huge collection usable.

Cunningham's highest priority is to get everything computer-cataloged, which will enable searches by title, composer or lyricist, year of composition or type of music, among many other criteria. The library owns a donated computer, but the cataloging is only about 25 percent completed. Years of work remain to be done.

Library use is growing. Many people have learned about it through word of mouth—and not just potential users, but potential donors of music and money as well. Users include music ensembles, theatre organists, orchestras, schools and other libraries. And students have researched musical and socio/cultural projects in its stacks.

What perpetually hampers the library is funding. It charges fees to its patrons, for searches and photocopies (original music never circulates), but Cunningham freely admits that the library could not pay its own way if it had to pay rent. It is essentially subsidized by the Paramount, which donates space and office facilities. Seven thousand more titles were recently computer-cataloged thanks to the user fees. But volunteers have continued to do most of the work, and Cunningham herself has put in a great many unpaid hours over the years.

Clearly, this library is a labor of love. Jack Bethards, Peter Botto and the staff of the Paramount, bandleaders Peter Mintun and Kim Venaas, organists Jim Roseveare and Jim Riggs are a few of the people who have kept it going. And it would still be packed away in unopened boxes without Jean Cunningham. Enough people with a feeling for the past have been hooked to ensure its continuity— —one hopes. The efforts of caring and knowledgeable volunteers will go a long way.

Caring about it? That's easy. It's a treasure trove of incalculable richness. And besides, where else will you find titles such as "I've Never Seen a Straight Banana," "How I Love Bulgarians," or "Princess Pupule Has Plenty Papaya, She Loves to Give It Away"?

The Paramount Library will be happy to accept donations of sheet music, as well as tax-deductible financial contributions for its ongoing operation. Contact Jean Cunningham or John Tenney at (510) 893-2300, extension 810.