UC SANTA BARBARA

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Musical Interlude

When filmmaker Charles Kaufmann was researching his documentary on the pioneering African-American pianist Frances Walker, she told him about a particular song she often listened to as a child. “Alice Blue Gown” it was called, and Kaufmann wanted to include it in the film. Locating the little-known recording, however, was a challenge.

Kauffman turned to UC Santa Barbara’s new Discography of American Historical Recordings (DAHR), an online database of more than 100,000 master recordings from pioneering record companies, and he struck musical gold. There he found the waltz, in all its obscure glory, recorded Oct. 5, 1920, by the Victor Talking Machine Co.

Kaufmann contacted David Seubert, curator of the performing arts collection in the UCSB Library’s Department of Special Collections, which oversees the discography. After receiving permission from Sony Music Entertainment, the recording’s owner, Seubert provided Kaufmann with a high-quality recording for the film.

It’s the sort of happy ending that would have been much more complicated prior to the DAHR and its predecessor, the UCSB Library’s Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Recordings (EDVR). “That’s the kind of thing that’s great,” Seubert said. “What might have taken considerable time to track down by canvassing public and private collections now can happen with a few mouse clicks.”

Part of the university's American Discography Project (ADP), the DAHR database is an expanded replacement of the EDVR. It allows anyone to search early master recordings from the Victor Talking Machine Co., Columbia Records and the Berliner Gramophone Co.

Now, with a $500,000 grant from the Packard Humanities Institute, the DAHR will be adding data on recordings by Okeh and Brunswick, and will be acquiring rights to the data for Decca Records.

The DAHR has its roots in the work of two discographers, Bill Moran and Ted Fagan, who started documenting recordings of the Victor Talking Machine Co. in the 1960s. By the 1980s they had documented tens of thousands of recording sessions. Their work, which became the EDVR, moved to UCSB in 2005.

"I don't want to say it's taken on a life of its own … but when we took it over 10 years ago, we didn't think, 'Oh, we're going to make a gigantic discography that covers everything before 1950,' " said Seubert. "Scholars of early recordings fantasized that there would be such a thing, but I didn't know it would be happening here at UCSB, or that it would be as far along as it is now."

In addition to operating independently, the DAHR also partners with the Library of Congress National Jukebox, providing an online database of more than 10,000 recordings made by the Victor Talking Machine Co. from 1901 to 1925. The digitized recordings are streamed, but cannot be downloaded.

Conceived by Sam Brylawski, DAHR co-director, who worked at the Library of Congress for three decades, the National Jukebox is licensed by Sony Music Entertainment to stream recordings from Victor, Columbia, Berliner and others.

It allows visitors to search by song, artist, lyricist, genre, composer, year and place. It's easy to find a 1911 recording of, say, Al Jolson singing George M. Cohan's "That Haunting Melody," or early recordings by the great tenor Enrico Caruso. There are even two songs from 1905 — "The Whistling Girl" and "The Laughing Song" — by George Washington Johnson, the first African-American recording artist.

UCSB, the Library of Congress and a private company in Philadelphia are digitizing recordings for the National Jukebox, and, according to Seubert, more than 20,000 have been converted. "I think within a couple of years there'll be 40 to 50 thousand pieces you can listen to online. They're all unique titles," he said.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.