

Billie Holiday's apartment jazz session recording finds way to archive at University of Idaho

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BOISE, Idaho: With cocktail glasses clinking in the background, jazz singer Billie Holiday stood near a piano amid partygoers inside an apartment overlooking New York City's Hudson River. She began singing "Good Morning Heartache."

It was Nov. 18, 1956. Tony Scott joined her on clarinet as the voices of others gathered at 340 Riverside Drive, including "Tonight Show" founder Steve Allen, receded into a respectful hush.

This virtually unknown bootleg — and about 100 cubic feet (2.83 cubic meters) of additional reel-to-reel audio tapes, newspaper clippings, films and boxes of a writer's working files — are part of historical material accumulated by musician, producer and critic Leonard Feather in his half-century association with jazz royalty like Holiday. He donated it to the University of Idaho's International Jazz Collection following his death at age 80 in 1994.

While copyright laws have stymied efforts to make the recordings available to a broader commercial audience, the Moscow, Idaho, school plans to make at least a sampling of Holiday's party performance and other Feather materials available to those attending this February's Lionel Hampton International Jazz Festival.

"It's like doing an Ouija board and hearing voices from the other side," said Michael Tarabulski, an archivist at the International Jazz Collection.

How did Feather get Holiday and Scott, a celebrated bebop player who died in March, on tape? It was Feather playing the piano. The uptown Manhattan apartment belonged to him.

Included in the collection are about 50 of Feather's "Blindfold Tests," where he interviewed greats like Benny Goodman with their eyes covered, an effort to promote fair critiques of new strains of jazz based on how they sounded, not who was playing them.

Feather, a native of England whose updated "Encyclopedia of Jazz" remains an important biographical reference, helped popularize the swing era. Before his death 13 years ago, he often joined his friend Hampton, a percussionist and vibes player, at the University of Idaho's annual jazz festival.

It was this association that convinced him to donate his collection to the university, whose archive also houses historical material from Hampton, trombonist Al Grey as well as vocalists Joe Williams and Ella Fitzgerald and trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Doc Cheatham and Conte Candoli.

The university has had Feather's recordings since 2003, but their contents weren't known until the school finally sent them away to Philadelphia last year to be converted into digital files, a form that could be more easily accessed by historians.

"I asked them to give me a call if they found some pretty fantastic stuff," said Tarabulski, who said the phone call he then got exceeded his expectations.

By 1956, the 42-year-old Holiday's voice was near its best, even if her liver would fail within three years.

On Nov. 10, 1956, she performed at Carnegie Hall. Eight days later, she was in Feather's living room, where she sang at least eight songs, including "Bless the Child," "Lady Sings the Blues," and "You Go to My Head."

In addition to clarinetist Scott and Allen, nightclub pianist Bobby Short was on hand, as was jazz singer Helen Merrill, who performed with Holiday.

But while some of the material would be a seminal part of any jazz aficionados' personal collection, Tarabulski said copyright laws may prevent that from happening soon.

"Our problem is in making it accessible," Tarabulski said, of the recordings Feather made of conversations and sessions with artists. "He didn't obtain their permission, he was just using it to write his articles. We're loathe to put it out on the airwaves, because people could copy it. And yet, what a shame."