

At vast New York warehouse, preserving records in the digital age

The turntable needle drops and the reverbs of the obscure band The Motifs ring out, bouncing off mountains of records lining the dusty warehouse housing America's largest pop music collection. The cavernous independent private music library, known as the ARChive of Contemporary Music, on a non-descript street in lower Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood claims more than three million recordings — mostly vinyl and some CDS and cassettes, not to mention a vast collection of memorabilia.

"You're just constantly discovering things that you wouldn't know," its co-founder B. George told AFP from his desk tucked behind the stacks. In an age dominated by streaming and the ephemerality of digital media, places like the ARChive can prove vital to preserving physical copies of music that can be key to future listening. News over the summer that some 500,000 recordings from legends like Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Joni Mitchell and Eric Clapton were destroyed in a 2008 blaze at Universal Studios threw the importance of safeguarding physical copies into stark relief.

Some of the work lost included master recordings, the raw material for lucrative reissues and posthumous releases. While nothing can replace a lost master, George said labels have called on his archive to hear versions as close to the original as possible. Two discs of a reissue from the late Nigerian superstar Fela Kuti, for example, were made from vinyl belonging to the ARChive. "Trying to keep a collection intact is really important," George said.



NEW YORK: B. George, the Co-Founder and Director of the ARChive of Contemporary Music in front of the institution's vast collection that includes some 3 million recordings. — AFP photos

Star-studded board

George started the archive in 1985, when the area was just beginning to attract artists eager to colonize the old warehouses for cheap. At one point the archive scored 125,000 classic rock LPs — some 1,500 of them signed by artists including Jimi Hendrix — from a house in Boston that was condemned after it was found to be literally sinking under the weight of the vinyl.

Contrary to the snobbish reputation often ascribed to collectors and curators, the ARChive welcomes essentially everything related to pop music — which it defines as "not

classical" — with open arms. And it relies on philanthropy to pay the ever-increasing rent in one of the country's most expensive zip codes, especially from celebrity musicians. Early supporters included avant garde performer Laurie Anderson — who George introduced to her future husband, Lou Reed — and Nile Rodgers, known for hits like "Le Freak" by his disco group Chic, the original sheet music of which lives at the ARChive.

Current board members include Rodgers, Richards, Youssou N'Dour, Martin Scorsese and Paul Simon, while both Reed and David Bowie are emeritus. Today the mammoth col-



lection — maintained by George and a revolving door of volunteers and interns — is used primarily for research by the recording industry as well as filmmakers and researchers. The Grammy Museum, for example, once needed 3,000 record labels and covers for graphics, and turned to George.

"You can come to us and say I need 3,000 things in two weeks and there's a good chance we're going to have almost all of them," he said. But though George sees the preservation of the physical as a vital task, he says "everything is fugitive" to the prospect of disaster. The ARChive is working with the San Francisco-

based nonprofit Internet Archive to start digitizing, and keep "as many things in as many places as possible."

Some 130,000 78rpm records — brittle vinyls usually made of shellac resin, popular until the mid-20th century — have been digitized so far, for example, and are available for free streaming online, George said. "Libraries burn," he said. "Realistically in 5,000 years this will all be dust." "You do your best, you hope that the migration will happen, that it'll go to the next stage, it'll go to the next way of being preserved, but it's unpredictable." — AFP

South Africa cosplayers flock to African comic convention



Clad in an array of capes, masks, pointy elf ears and spectacular face paint, comics fans gathered in South Africa's biggest city this weekend for the second edition of Comic Con Africa. Dressed as their favorite superhero, fans of cosplay — a portmanteau for costume play — strolled around Johannesburg's Gallagher convention centre, meeting writers, illustrators and fellow enthusiasts.

"It's the first time I've been here. I have heard so much about it so I wanted to experience it," said Nishen Deepchand, peering out from a black Batman mask. "I've teamed up with Tinkerbell as well. It's a special love affair but nobody knows about it so make sure you don't tell Batgirl." Sponsors of the four-day event, which opened on Saturday, are expecting 60,000 attendees — a unique opportunity for new creators to showcase their work.

Guests of honor this year included Loyiso Mkize, the artist behind South Africa's first superhero. Mkize's three-volume illustrated story of "Kwezi" — a 19-year old boy in South Africa who discovers he has superpowers — has been a hit in the country. "The fan base has grown to now in the tens of thousands," Mkize told AFP. "That's an amazing feat, particularly for an industry in South Africa where we



thought there was no industry."

Mkize is among a growing movement of African illustrators striving to bring more diversity to the global comic scene. Since 2013, Nigerian start-up Comic Republic have created a series of superheroes referred to as "Africa's Avengers" by fans. And in 2015 Nigerian-born Royce Okupe launched the futur-

istic saga "E.X.O. - The Legend of Wale Williams". Last year, Marvel studios released the first superhero blockbuster featuring an entirely black cast. "Creating South Africa's first superhero was the first leg," said Mki. "But continuing that legacy and continuing the story and the narrative along with our readers has been the journey". — AFP



Taylor Swift pulls out of Melbourne Cup gig

Pop superstar Taylor Swift has pulled out of a performance at the Melbourne Cup, with animal rights activists taking credit after a campaign to highlight cruelty to racehorses. The Grammy Award-winner was announced as the headline act for the "race that stops a nation" earlier this month and was due to sing two songs from her latest hit album "Lover". But it sparked a backlash on social media and a push by the Campaign for the Protection of Racehorses, which claimed she had "put money before compassion" and was "endorsing animal abuse".

More than 6,500 people signed an online petition urging her to cancel. In a statement late Saturday, promoter Mushroom Events cited scheduling issues as the reason for Swift's no-show. "Changes to her Asian promo schedule have made it logistically impossible for her to be here," it said. The Campaign for the Protection of Racehorses applauded the decision. "The pressure on Taylor Swift to cancel her performance was significant," it said on Facebook. "Her fans did not want to see her supporting animal abuse. Whilst the reason being used by the racing industry is a scheduling mix-up, it appears to us that she has responded to those calls."

Six horses have died at the Melbourne Cup since 2013, including one last year when Irish five-year-old The Cliffs of Moher was euthanised after suffering a fractured right shoulder during a race that has been run on the first Tuesday of November since 1876. "Obviously, this (Swift pulling out) is disappointing for everyone," said Victoria Racing Club chief executive Neil Wilson. "We understand how important the pre-Cup entertainment is and we look forward to providing an update (on other acts) shortly." — AFP

Iceland fined for Eurovision pro-Palestinian protest

GENEVA: Organizers of the Eurovision Song Contest said Saturday they had fined Iceland after the band it entered displayed scarves with Palestinian flags during the contest's final in Israel. Iceland's group Hatari brandished scarves with Palestinian flags when the final results were being announced at the end of the event, which was held last May in Tel Aviv.

Contest organizers the European Broadcasting Union said Saturday in a statement sent to AFP that the gesture infringed their rules banning political gestures. They declined to say how much they had fined Iceland's public broadcaster, but said it was "in line with the rules of the competition". The fine had also been upheld following an appeal it said. Hatari is known for their opposition to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Rule 2.6 of the competition stipulates that participants should do nothing to use it for political ends. During the same event guest performer Madonna also provoked controversy when her dancers carried Israeli and Palestinian flags on their costumes. "It was a mistake," said Israel's Culture Minister Miri Regev. "You cannot mix politics at a cultural event, with all due respect to Madonna." Israel hosted this year's event because of the victory of their singer Netta Barzilai the previous year. Next year's Eurovision Song Contest will be held in the Netherlands. — AFP