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WGN radio sells vintage record collection

Dusty Groove America bought records that have been in storage for decades

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Tens of thousands of vinyl records stored for decades at WGN radio will soon be for sale through a Chicago-based record store.

Dusty Groove America, which operates a storefront as well as a mail-order business, purchased a major portion of the record collection that's been accumulating at WGN, owned by Tribune Co., since the late 1950s.

Store owner Rick Wojcik and his employees hauled dozens of cardboard boxes filled with LPs, 45s, 78s and CDs out of WGN's storage space in Tribune Tower on Michigan Avenue last week and took them to Dusty Groove headquarters at 1120 N. Ashland Ave.

"I saw records in that collection I've never seen before," Wojcik said. "I've seen records in that collection I've never seen original copies of before."

WGN radio recently moved to a smaller space in Tribune Tower and doesn't have the room to store the collection, which contains about 45,000 records, said Bill White, the station's director of programming and news. Station officials shopped the collection to dealers before choosing Dusty Groove based on its reputation as a quality store, White said.

"With the advent of the Internet and digital music, the record library had become obsolete and was no longer being used," he said in an email. "Rather than have it sit in off-site storage, we decided to put it in the hands of a true collector."

Neither White nor Wojcik would discuss the sale price or the estimated value of the records. "WGN radio's collection has to be absolutely priceless," said Rick Morris, associate professor of communications studies at Northwestern University.

The selection is broad because WGN wasn't hitched to a specific music genre and kept all of the records it received, Morris said. The records are in excellent condition because they weren't



Dusty Groove employee Bryan Lear sorts through stacks of r...

played a lot, according to Wojcik.

"These were not marked up that badly," he said. "Some things were just beautiful, immaculate."

Wojcik and his employees now have the grueling — but for them, exciting — task of sorting through the records. Boxes containing the collection fill parts of the second floor and the basement of the Dusty Groove offices. The records are being cleaned, and any warps they developed are being fixed before they are priced and put on the sales floor.

Wojcik has purchased many large record collections from individuals, but he said the WGN collection is different, spanning genres and eras.

"The wonderful thing for me taking this journey was they were all stocked chronologically," he said. "You'd hit Christmas every year."

Opening one of the boxes in the Dusty Groove offices, Wojcik pulled out a random stack of LPs by artists including Motown star Mary Wells, jazz guitarist Grant Green and obscure British Invasion group Ian and the Zodiacs. The same box also included sets of classical recordings and Latin jazz compilations.

Before WGN became a talk-radio station, it played music. Like radio stations across the country, WGN regularly received music in the mail from record companies hoping to get their acts on the air, White said.

Even after the format changed, on-air personalities used music in their shows and relied on the record library department to search the collection for the right song.

"Today when we want to play music on-air, most of this material is available to us in digital formats, at our fingertips," White said.

The records Dusty Groove didn't purchase will be donated to the Chicago Independent Radio Project, or CHIRP, which operates a mostly free-form Internet radio station and hosts an annual record fair.

Brendan O'Neill, CHIRP's record fair donation coordinator, said he was an intern at WGN in 2004 and would spend time looking through the records at Tribune Tower.

O'Neill said some of the donated records will be sold at future CHIRP record sales, while others will be stored in its music library for volunteer disc jockeys to play on the air. The records CHIRP keeps will mostly be the rare, unusual and obscure — those that can't be found on CD or iTunes, O'Neill said.

That philosophy could be the future of vinyl on the airwaves. Many stations — especially those owned by major media companies — long ago abandoned records for CDs, which have given way to MP3 files, Northwestern's Morris said.

But not all music is available on those more contemporary formats. Independent and college stations, like CHIRP's and Northwestern's, respectively, have DJs that play music that can be found only on vinyl, Morris said.

And if the records can't find a home at another radio station, collectors likely will snatch them up. Those who purchase a rarity from Dusty Groove or CHIRP's record fair dealers might be handling

something even more interesting than they originally thought: a piece of Chicago radio history.

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