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Theft of Tejano music breaks collector's heart

In May, thieves stole a trailer containing 15,000 of Marcelo H. Tafoya's records.

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Marcelo H. Tafoya collects pieces of history served on vinyl platters. The retired radio broadcaster says that over nearly half a century, he's amassed a collection of perhaps 100,000 **Tejano** records, vintage 78s and 45s, albums, cassettes, posters and memorabilia. It's enough to fill an 18-wheeler. Tafoya knows this because he stores the bulk of his collection in one.

"It's a passion to me," said Tafoya, 74, who lives in East Austin. "These are the rarest of the rare."

But Tafoya's treasure is lighter these days.

In mid-May, thieves drove off with a large trailer in which Tafoya estimates he had stored more than 15,000 of his records.

The roughly 20-foot-by-30-foot trailer belonged to Southwest Key Programs and was parked at the nonprofit's East Austin College Prep campus off U.S. 183 and East Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Before, Tafoya had been storing the records in a portable building outside his home, but he says he had to get rid of the structure a few months ago because city inspectors said it was too close to the street.

"It's been really heartbreaking for us. Every time I think about it, I just get sick to my stomach," Juan Sanchez, Southwest Key's president, said about the theft. Sanchez had offered Tafoya use of the trailer after hearing of his predicament.

In 1995, Tafoya founded the nonprofit **Tejano Artist Music Museum**. But it's a museum in name only, and Tafoya has been in search of a building ever since.

Sanchez said he and Tafoya talked for some time about creating space for a museum on Southwest Key property. One idea was to display at least some of the trailer's contents at the East Austin College Prep site, which the nonprofit recently acquired. The trailer was supposed to be an interim step.

"Then one weekend it was gone," Sanchez said. "The value for Marcelo and for the community was invaluable and priceless."

Detective Shawn Lapuszynski said investigators see "a lot" of trailer theft in Austin, but theft of a trailer that size is not as common. "It's huge. It looks like a mobile office trailer," Lapuszynski said. "Spotting it was our biggest hope."

Police sent lookout alerts to the border, where it's possible the trailer could be parked on a ranch or a hunting lease, Lapuszynski said. A structure like it could be used as a stopping point for unauthorized immigrants trying to avoid border security checkpoints, he said.

Police don't have

any leads. Surveillance video did not produce helpful images, and recovering the records is proving difficult because it's hard to ascertain where anyone would try to unload or sell such a large quantity of **music**, Lapuszynski said.

The stocky, silver-haired Tafoya gets around on crutches. At his home last week he deftly navigated another portable building so jam-packed with rarities, there was barely room to stand. Vintage 78 rpm recordings that Tafoya said date to the 1920s filled shelves along one wall.

Tafoya said his collection includes rare early recordings by salsa legend Celia Cruz and Trio Los Panchos; a video of Selena singing when she was 13 years old; some of the first albums by **Tejano's** most recognizable figures, acts like Little Joe Hernandez, Ruben Ramos, Isidro Lopez and Sunny Ozuna; and countless others not so famous. Some artists recorded on obscure, defunct labels, producing just enough discs to sell at their shows.

"I don't think anybody's got the collection he has," said Leonard Davila, Tafoya's friend and a longtime veteran of the **Tejano music** scene who in the 1970s fronted his own band in Austin, Street People.

Davila contacted the American-Statesman last week after telling Tafoya he would help spread word in the hope that "maybe

somebody saw somebody take this thing."

In a professional life that has revolved around the genre, Tafoya began collecting in 1962 when he had **Tejano music** programs on three local radio stations.

By that time, young Mexican-American musicians were taking the stylings of Guy Lombardo and well-known big bands and fashioning their own horn-heavy **Tejano** orquesta sound, ditching the accordions synonymous with conjunto **music**.

"I knew these groups would never be able to preserve their **music**, because they're not into that," Tafoya said. He later bought stations in Lubbock, Lampasas and Hutto and became a **Tejano** dance promoter, too, hosting grand affairs at the old City Coliseum. "The men and women were dressed to kill," Tafoya said.

Tejano might never see that heyday again, said Tafoya, who estimates the value of his uninsured stolen records at \$100,000. Many of the records were given to him by recording artists and friends. As word spread of his collection, even strangers from faraway cities contacted him and offered him rare discs, he said.

The records are worth more than money, Tafoya says, because they are history, documenting a culture that might be forgotten if it isn't preserved. "It's an era that will never come back," he said.

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Marcelo H. Tafoya pulls out an old record from his collection of **Tejano** recordings last week. Tafoya has been collecting **Tejano** recordings and memorabilia for decades. Over the years his collection has grown to thousands of one-of-a-kind treasures from the genre. ALBERTO MARTÍNEZ / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Marcelo H. Tafoya has amassed a large collection of **Tejano music**. A trailer containing thousands of records was stolen in May. 'I don't care about the trailer,' he says, 'but I hope they didn't just throw the contents in the trash.' PHOTOS BY ALBERTO MARTÍNEZ / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The 20-foot-by-30-foot trailer containing the records belonged to Southwest Key Programs and was parked here at the nonprofit's East Austin College Prep campus off

U.S. 183 and East Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.