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Lost and Found: Tape of MLK's 1964 Dayton Speech

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(Click here (url: http://www.udayton.edu/news/images/components/mlk_speech_dayton_11291964.mp3) to listen to the speech, or follow the related link. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. begins speaking at the 10:30 mark.)

As a child of the Great Depression, University of Dayton poet and professor emeritus Herbert Woodward Martin developed a habit out of necessity: He's a pack rat.

"We used and reused everything until it completely wore out," Martin said. "That meant food, clothing, utensils, furniture, everything. I simply cannot shake the habit."

But while his garage is bursting with boxes of old letters, toys from fast food meals, admittance cards to Congress signed by Sen. Joseph McCarthy and Vice President Richard Nixon and autographs of every poet he's ever met, Martin never imagined he would have anything in his personal collections of true historical value.

He was wrong.

Unlabeled and misplaced in a box of memorabilia from the 1972 Paul Laurence Dunbar Centennial was an audio recording of civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at the University of Dayton Fieldhouse, Nov. 29, 1964. The discovery — hidden for more than 40 years — is the only known audio recording of the historic event.

"I was absolutely floored," Martin said. "I did not know the tape was there. I certainly did not know its value."

Martin was living 400 miles away attending graduate school in Buffalo, N.Y., when King came to speak in Dayton. How he came into possession of the tape escapes his memory.

"I am guessing I picked it out of someone's trash as a reusable tape," he said. "My second guess is someone gave it to me as an aid in teaching my African-American literature course at the University of Dayton. Exactly where it came from now is purely speculative."

The tape surfaced in late January following the premiere of *Jump Back, Honey*, a documentary about Martin, who is known nationally for his unforgettable performances of Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems and his own works of poetry and literature.

The combination of the Dunbar legacy and Martin's creative drive inspired independent filmmaker David Schock to craft the documentary, which reflects the breadth of Martin's own life and work.

After a visit to Dayton last spring to gather footage and materials for the film, Schock agreed to help Martin sort and load boxes from his garage for possible inclusion in the project.

Among the materials were recordings of poetry readings and presentations from the 1972 Dunbar Centennial in Dayton organized by Martin. There were also recordings of his performances, many of which were used in the documentary.

There was one reel-to-reel tape, however, that just didn't fit in with the project, but it caught Schock's attention, so he set it aside. Months later, with the documentary finished, Schock returned to the mysterious recording.

The only label on the recording was a small piece of paper stuck to the reel with the name "Chisholm" written in ballpoint ink. Schock wondered if Chisholm was the recordist. Martin suggested it might refer to the late Shirley Chisholm, who while running for president of the United States in 1972 made an appearance in Dayton.

The recording begins with a narrator who introduces the speakers: "The tape which you are about to hear was made in the University of Dayton Fieldhouse on Sunday, November the 29th, nineteen-hundred and sixty-four. The first voice that you will hear is that of (Dayton) Commissioner (Don) Crawford, and then that of that of President Charles Wesley of Central State College."

"It was definitely not Dunbar," Schock said, describing his first time listening to the recording. "Still, I rolled in on the tape to make sure I wasn't dealing with an audio palimpsest — a reused tape. I wasn't, but I remembered thinking that Dr. Wesley sounded very familiar. He had a certain preacherly cadence."

Schock did hear a voice he recognized, but it wasn't Charles Wesley. It was Martin Luther King Jr.

King was on campus on the snowy night of Nov. 29, 1964, for Dayton's Freedom Forum, sponsored by the Rev. George Lucas of the Bethel Baptist Church in Dayton. He spoke to a crowd of more than 6,200 for about an hour on the state of race relations in America, his commitment to nonviolence and the power of unconditional love.

"I'm convinced, my friends, that we've come a long, long way," he said. "And I am absolutely convinced that the system of segregation is on its deathbed today, and the only thing uncertain about it is how costly the segregationists will make the funeral."

But he cautioned America still had "a long, long way to go."

Proof of his words came from protests that night by members of the National States Rights Party who marched outside the Fieldhouse. The late Rev. Jack Kelley, a Marianist priest who attended the lecture, recalled in a 1999 interview protestors carried signs bearing strong, racist messages: "Communist King, go home!" and "Go Home, Martin Luther Coon!"

And in his presentation to King of a key to the city, Dayton City Commissioner Don Crawford remarked with frustration that "(the key) is supposed to figuratively at least open all the doors and all the hearts of the city which they represent — but there still, in this city, are some doors that neither this key nor my persuasion could open for you."

Near the end of the speech, immediately after King declares his commitment to go to jail for obeying the moral obligation of "non-cooperation with evil," the recording abruptly ends. Schock believes the recording is a copy of the original, and the rest of the speech may still be out there, perhaps hidden away in someone's attic or garage.

Schock converted the old audio into a digital file, enhanced the quality and posted the entire recording on the Web site, www.jumpbackhoney.com. He welcomes people who have photographs, memories, programs or any other mementos from King's visit to share them on the Web site.

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