Grateful Dead archives going to UC Santa Cruz

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(04-23) 14:36 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- The archives of the Bay Area rock band the Grateful Dead - a treasure trove of more than 30 years of memorabilia that includes the band's first recording contract, life-size skeletons of band members and artwork hand-made by its fans - are headed to UC Santa Cruz, where they will be displayed at McHenry Library.

Few bands are more associated with San Francisco, and the images connected with many of the archive items are instantly recognizable to millions of fans around the world. The archive, which occupies 2,000 square feet of a Marin warehouse, contains thousands of pieces.

Margaret Barrette, director for entertainment memorabilia sales at Bonhams & Butterfields auction house in Los Angeles, estimated the value of such a collection "in the millions." She said Bonhams' auction of Grateful Dead crew member Lawrence "Ramrod" Shurtleff's collection last year netted $1 million, "and that was only 100 pieces."

Guitarist and singer Bob Weir, drummer Mickey Hart and UC Santa Cruz Chancellor George Blumenthal will announce the donation at 11 a.m. today on the Dead's Web site (www.dead.net) live from San Francisco's Fillmore Auditorium, the historic venue where the band emerged as part of the psychedelic ballroom scene in the 1960s.

The archive has been tended all these years by Eileen Law, who was hired in 1972 to take care of the Deadheads, the casually formed fan club born after the band invited fans to write to a San Rafael post office box on its 1971 eponymous album, popularly known as "Skull & Roses." That opened the floodgates for a fan base whose devotion was unprecedented and remains unmatched in the history of rock 'n' roll.

Law worked for the band for 34 years. She saved everything: press clippings, photographs, tickets, backstage passes, promotional materials, business records, posters, T-shirts and other Dead merchandise, issues of the band's '70s newsletter, all the band's posters, vinyl albums, CDs, videos, cassette tapes of hot line messages announcing tour dates, thousands of decorated envelopes mailed to the band's ticket office, even all the show guest lists.

"I was just the person that never shredded," Law said from her home in San Anselmo. "It started off in my little closet" at the Dead's headquarters in San Rafael, "and it kept growing and growing, and now it fills up a warehouse."

After the band broke up following Jerry Garcia's death in 1995, the surviving members kept the office
open, finally closing operations in 2006.

In August of that year, they moved the extensive vault of the band's musical recordings in four refrigerated 18-wheelers to Los Angeles, where it is maintained by Rhino Records, which is authorized to release the band's music. The question remained of what to do with the archive.

Both UC Berkeley, where bassist Phil Lesh was once a student, and Stanford, which his son now attends, made a pitch for the archive. But the Dead members ultimately chose UC Santa Cruz. McHenry Library will have a dedicated, interactive reading room tentatively named Dead Central with music playing and rotating exhibitions. The library is being renovated and expanded and is set to open in fall 2009, and the archive will be available to fans and researchers alike.

"I think it's a perfect fit for Santa Cruz - the ethos of the band, the whole idea of community sharing, is really well matched with our campus," said Christine Bunting, head of special collections for the library. "Our campus has a great music program, and we're really interested in the study of American vernacular music and popular culture.

"We also have this whole side that's concerned with social justice and tolerance and community spirit. And I think that fits so perfectly with what the band has done and what the Deadheads have sustained over the years."

The connections between the band and the university are long and deep. They both came into existence in the mid-'60s. Law's son-in-law, Cameron Sears, former manager of the Grateful Dead and now of Weir's band RatDog - is a Santa Cruz alumnus, as is the daughter of Alan Trist, head of the Grateful Dead's publishing company, Ice Nine. Santa Cruz music Professor Fred Lieberman has taught a class in the music of the Grateful Dead for years and has collaborated with Hart on two books. The campus radio station has a weekly show featuring the band's music called "Dead Serious."

The library already has the archives of science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein and Beat poet, painter and novelist Kenneth Patchen and the only intact collection of photographer Edward Weston's project prints in the world. But the Dead archive will be the university's biggest.

The archive contains many historical documents, such as notes from the band's weekly meetings. "That's the kind of primary material that shows what their decisions were at the time they were making them," Bunting said.

But the most interesting aspect of the archive, she said, is "the whole Deadhead side to it. The band's following is a phenomenon in itself."

How does Law feel about letting go of the archive she tended all those years?

"It's like sending your kids off to college: 'Oh, they're leaving home!' That's what it feels like, even though now I know it will be preserved and well taken care of. It's another stage of development."

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I found UC Santa Cruz to be an institution young enough to accept the collection and to appreciate it for what it represents and how it dovetails and augments the Grateful Dead archive, said Shoaf. Of course Thompson knew the Dead, spent time living in San Francisco and Big Sur during the sixties, and also hung out with the Hell’s Angels motorcycle club that became friendly with the Dead. To me the synergies of placing this Thompson collection alongside the Grateful Dead archive, and its appeal to researchers for both subjects, made this an easy decision to place the collection at UC Santa Cruz.