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LIFESTYLE

Student Tommy José Stathes Has the World's Largest Collection of Early Cartoons

By Bryan Llenas
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Photo: Christopher Person

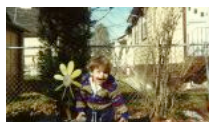
The world's largest collection of early animated films isn't in a museum or library, it's stored in the closet of a 21-year-old Cuban American college student in Queens, New York.

Tommy José Stathes began his collection at age 11, after becoming interested in the history of the cartoons he read about in film history books.

Once he realized most of these films couldn't be rented at a local video store,

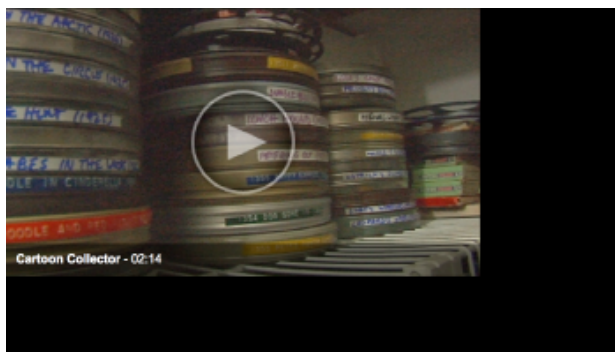
he started haunting antique stores and estate sales looking for films and related memorabilia, sometimes buying online from collectors many times his age.

"When I began reading books about animation history I realized that it was really difficult to see a lot of the films that were being written about, so at a young age I began looking for them," Stathes said.



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Cartoon Collector - 02:14

Tommy abandoned the playground in a search for these lost treasures.

"For several years now I've made it my business to go out and find these films and bring them all together and hopefully revive them in someday."

Now, he owns over 1,000 films that include characters like Koko the Clown, Felix the Cat, Baby Peggy, and Farmer Alfalfa. These characters and animated works of art served as blueprints for cartoonists who would later go on to work for Disney and Warner Brothers to create today's popular characters like Betty

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Boop, Popeye, and Woody the Woodpecker.

"These people were innovators and they learned how to animate as they went along. When you watch these things you see they are making films for the general public but they're also learning as they go along."

Stathes calls these relics the forgotten films, or lost films. Before 1928, silent films were the norm but once sound was introduced to film the once valued silent cartoons became valueless and thrown away. Now, Stathes is fueled by the desire to uncover a history he deeply cares about.

So what is the mystery behind this collector?

Stathes is unlike anyone you've ever met before. He is a shy, eloquent old soul with an immeasurable passion for an art-form that he believes is an important part of history that should not be forgotten, instead, celebrated. No matter how hard the journey continues to be.

"It has been very difficult for someone who doesn't come from money or as a young person to do something like this but I have been very clever in trading with other collectors or reselling unneeded films."

While no one has appraised the value of his collection, he would tell you it's worth thousands and says it would be nearly impossible to let go of a collection that embodies a very large part of his persona and spirit.

"At 21 my research career would be over. Hopefully for many decades to come I can build on what I've done already."

Tommy now leads his own initiative to make sure audiences can be introduced to the classics. He hosts public screenings in New York City, in any venue he can.

"I'm up to my eighth show in a year and a half," he said. "I want to revive these films and hopefully garner more interest in them. My best shows have attracted about 100 people so far so I think it is promising."

[For more information on Tommy Stathes and his efforts visit his website here.](#)

bryan.llenas@foxnewslatino.com

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