



Typewriters of famous artists will be displayed at University of Alabama

By Mark Hughes Cobb / Staff Writer

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At present, Steve Soboroff claims 38 children. There are five biological kids, mostly grown, including NBC and MSNBC correspondent Jacob Soboroff, but the Los Angeles businessman and civic leader has, through auctions, connections, estate sales and wives, adopted 38 babies constructed of keys, ribbons, steel, rubber and type.

In their prime, those 38 co-birthed Superman and the Spectre; aboriginal Martians and Mr. Dark, the Illustrated Man; Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat; Holly Golightly and her fascination with Tiffany's; "A Hard Day's Night," "The Sun Also Rises" and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." Nine pieces from the Steve Soboroff Typewriter Collection go on display Friday at the University of Alabama Gallery in the Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center for "Alabama Types: Poets, Playwrights & Storytellers."

The typewriters loaned to the Southern Literary Trail and University of Alabama College of Arts & Sciences include those of Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, Gore Vidal, George Bernard Shaw, Tom Hanks, Ray Bradbury, John Lennon and Maya Angelou.

Exclusive to this version of the exhibit will be typewriters used by Alabama writers James Haskins, who wrote more than 100 books for adults and children, many focusing on the African-American experience, including "The Cotton Club," source for the Francis Ford Coppola film; William Bradford Huie, journalist and novelist who wrote several books adapted into films, including "The Americanization of Emily," "The Revolt of Mamie Stover" and "The Execution of Private Slovik"; and Harper Lee.

The latter is a Quiet Royal DeLuxe model, displayed with an authentication signed by Lee, and to be displayed next to that of her lifelong friend Capote. It's the machine she used to write the iconic "To Kill a Mockingbird," one of the biggest-selling, most-known novels in the world. Earlier this week, PBS' "The Great American Read" named "Mockingbird" America's best-loved novel, after it received 242,275 votes of about 4.3 million cast by the public.

Soboroff likes to chat with folks viewing his collection; he'll be in town Nov. 8 to do just that.

"Sometimes people drive hundreds of miles to see them, and to be around them, because of whose they were, and what (the creators) thought about when they were around the typewriters," Soboroff said, in a phone interview from L.A. Visitors name three basic reasons for the attraction.

"First and foremost is 'Oh my God, that's Ernest Hemingway's typewriter!'," he said, laughing. "It was their partner in creation. It's not like finding a pair of their shoes."

When Soboroff acquired the Bochelli Braillewriter of Andrea Bocelli, the blind Italian tenor told him that typewriter was "an extension of his heart."

"The second reason, people say, 'Well, you know, I've got one of those. I had one that looked just like that,'" Soboroff said. "Then the third is, 'My father, my grandfather, they had a typewriter, and this is what it meant to them.'"

Visitors like to gently, reverently, caress the same 1932 Royal Model keys touched by the fingers of Papa Hemingway, or those of the playwright who inspired the modifier Shavian, or that of the late rocker, whose 1951 Imperial The Good Companion Model T can be seen in promotional photos from "A Hard Day's Night," propped on Lennon's lap. The Liverpoolian wrote lyrics for the Quarrymen and the Beatles on that Imperial, until he traded up for a newer model around the time of "Abbey Road" and "The White Album." In 2012, former 007 actor Pierce Brosnan paid \$5,000 to type on Lennon's 1951 Imperial, donated to Soboroff's preferred charity, the Jim Murray Memorial Foundation, which provides scholarships to journalism students.

It was Pulitzer-Prize-winning Los Angeles Times sportswriter Murray who inadvertently inspired Soboroff's second family. Soboroff grew up in Chicago, listening to Brooklyn Dodgers games on the shortwave radio, a gift from his dad. When his father's hat business collapsed, the family moved to Los Angeles, where his mom opened a successful Beverly Hills linens boutique; the Dodgers had moved to L.A. a few years before.

"When Sandy Koufax came along ... when he would lose, I would cry. But he didn't lose often," said Soboroff, who developed shopping centers, and began making contacts that would see him become president of the L.A. Recreation and Parks Commission, chairman and CEO of the Playa Vista planned community, president of the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, and, briefly, vice chairman of the Dodgers. He's held numerous board and executive positions, and was considered a chief mover behind development of the Staples Center arena, which kept the Lakers and Kings in L.A.

After pitching a no-hitter against the Giants, Koufax gave the glove he wore to his friend Herb Scharfman, a photographer for Sports Illustrated. Soboroff bought the glove from Scharfman's daughter, under one condition.

"If I buy it, you can't say I bought it," he said. He'd paid \$28,000; Soboroff had been encouraged to run for mayor by then-Mayor Richard Riordan, who couldn't run again because of term limits.

"You've got a third of L.A. doesn't make \$28,000 a year; how would that look if it came out?" Soboroff said. "Then Billy Crystal pays \$300,000 for Mickey Mantle's glove, and I'm saying, 'Here's my kids' ticket to college.'"

But he held onto the artifact until 2005. After losing the mayoral bid, and with all five kids either starting or already in college, Soboroff asked a friend to see how rare his memento might be.

"Guy calls me back, says, 'This is going to be a very short conversation: Sell the glove,'" Soboroff said, laughing.

The typewriter collecting begins

At a Sotheby's auction, the glove sold for roughly \$100,000 more than he'd paid. Up next came a Remington Model J typewriter used by Murray, Soboroff's favorite columnist from back in the day. He launched into a minor bidding war with an agent from the Dodgers, and another from the L.A. Times.

"I overpaid, and bought it for \$18,000," he said. "It's sort of like when you're in Las Vegas: You win \$200 worth of house money, you might be careless. It's just chips."

But that typewriter became something more than an impulse buy, after reflection.

"It was just phenomenal to me, when I started looking through the different things he'd typed on it." The emotional connection overtook him.

"Living in this world where our kids deal with things that last for 15 minutes, computers or iPhones last a year or two years, these typewriters have been going 75 years, and they'll go another 75," he said.

Sitting down to one of these sturdy — mostly basic black steel — machines creates a simultaneously calming and stimulating effect, he said.

"Your heart rate slows, your mind starts thinking. It's like taking a walk in the woods. It spurs creativity."

So collecting began, through estate sales, auctions, and personal connections, once word got around Soboroff was on the hunt. A few years back, he bumped into fellow typewriter enthusiast Tom Hanks, who collects for the machines themselves, not histories or connections. At the time, Soboroff owned 25 machines; Hanks' collection is said to number more than 100. They share the same repair and restoration guy.

"He said if I ever found any duplicates ... I said 'Tom, no no no.' I said my deals, if they weren't on the cover of Time magazine, I'm not interested," Soboroff said. "He stops everything. Focuses on me like he's talking to Grace Kelly or something. Total zoom-in. He says to me, 'Hey, I was on the cover of Time twice.' Two days later, he has his typewriter delivered to me, with both Time magazines."

Typewriters owned by broad-appeal folks stay in demand. “Usually I get ’em through the families, or estates; sometimes they’ve given ’em to a housekeeper or a butler, or a secretary.”

Another stumbling block: provenance.

“I assume every one of them is a fake,” he said. “Here everything’s a fake until proven real.”

Easiest proof comes from still-living writers, family or close friends. And sometimes, as with Shaw, there are photographs of the writer with the instrument. Soboroff also utilizes forensic investigation.

“Even two of the same models, no two type exactly the same,” he said. For Hemingway’s 1932 Royal, he photocopied papers from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston.

“Then I typed the exact same words on the same page, and put it under a microscope.”

Once he bought, relatively cheap, a typewriter purportedly used on Rod Serling’s original five-season run of “The Twilight Zone.”

“It came from a studio lot, but then I couldn’t find the damn thing” on the show. Soboroff tracked down the president of the “Twilight Zone” fan club, 5 million strong, and paid the guy \$500 to scour every episode.

“But we couldn’t find (that typewriter) anywhere, so it’s not in the collection. I gave it to a bookstore.”

Adventures in the collecting world

He vividly recalls all the collecting adventures.

“Every one of these stories are so Americana crazy, so fun, so nuts,” Soboroff said.

Bradbury’s derived from a friend of his wife who’d worked on a documentary film about the fantasy writer, known for volumes of short stories such as “The Illustrated Man” and “The Martian Chronicles,” and novels such as “Fahrenheit

451,” “Something Wicked This Way Comes” and “Dandelion Wine.”

“His home was all disheveled, papers and books everywhere,” Soboroff said. “He must have never thrown anything away or cleaned anything. The typewriter was just sitting in a corner.”

Bradbury gave the 1947 Royal KMM to the filmmaker, Elliott Haimoff. It wasn’t the “Fahrenheit 451” typewriter, which Bradbury famously began on pay-typewriters, a dime for 30 minutes, in the basement of UCLA’s Powell Library, spending \$9.80 to write the first 25,000 words that became his most renowned book. But Soboroff’s Bradbury typewriter was used for other early writing, including correspondence. The filmmaker wanted it to be part of Soboroff’s collection, a good home.

“Most of them are in working order. I do have some restoration done; if something’s missing, I’ll have it replaced,” he said. The rubber-roller platens can go brittle, especially if the typewriter’s fallen into disuse.

“The typewriter Superman was written on hadn’t been typed in 30 years.” Soboroff replaced the platen on that one, after buying it from the daughter of Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel.

There’s only one he didn’t restore at all, out of reverence: Hemingway’s.

“I don’t care what it looks like, if it’s Truman Capote’s typewriter,” Soboroff said. His Orson Welles machine suffered a big dent, because the actor-writer-director used to take naps on his back. “He put (the typewriter) on his tummy, and it would of course fall off.”

The late journalist Andy Rooney, whose career spanned print, radio and TV, owned two typewriters, the same model. One he clacked on at his “60 Minutes” office; the other, the one Soboroff collected, came from his home.

“A garage sale! With his ties and his socks and everything, after he died,” Soboroff said. He’d seen the Norwalk, Connecticut, sale notice late on a Saturday night, after Rooney’s death in November 2011, and being in L.A., not knowing who else to try, looked up a random real-estate broker.

“I figured brokers are up all night; anything for a commission. I say, ‘Please don’t hang up; you don’t know who I am, but I’m calling from L.A., I’m the police commissioner here, so you can look me up. I need someone to go bid on Andy Rooney’s typewriter at a garage sale.’ He says, ‘So that’s what all that ruckus is about. I live two doors down from Andy Rooney.’ If that isn’t God’s will ...” Soboroff said.

Next morning, the broker, a retiree from the CIA, called to say there are hundreds lined up waiting to get into Rooney’s sale.

“I said, ‘You’re the one from the CIA. You figure it out!’ He calls me minutes later, like a little kid, ‘I’m in, I’m in!’ ”

The typewriter was to be auctioned last, but Soboroff pushed the broker to buy it outright from the estate salesperson.

“I said to the guy, ‘Get that typewriter out of that house. I don’t care what you do.’ ” Roughly 12 hours later, CBS lawyers tried to buy it, offering Soboroff \$125,000. But unlike the Koufax glove, he’s not parting with typewriters for money.

“These typewriters are (on display) to raise money for the awareness of them, and to benefit the Jim Murray scholarship fund for underserved journalism students,” Soboroff said. He’s held auctions, similar to the one Brosnan won, and has donated at least \$25,000 to the Murray fund.

A visit to Alabama

The Nov. 8 visit will be Soboroff’s first to Alabama. He’s cautious about who gets to borrow from or display the collection, and then only under strict conditions, with proper security: Soboroff’s concerned more about nicotine stains and milkshake spills than theft. But he found the Southern Literary Trail “very credible,” and hearing that Harper Lee’s typewriter would be placed next to Capote’s didn’t hurt.

“I’ve been after that,” he said. “When they said they were able to put (hers) next to Truman Capote’s? That’s not going to happen again.”

Soboroff works with a shipping company that handles major artworks.

“I put ’em in the back of a station wagon, wrap a towel around them,” he said.
“These Picassos and all these museum pieces, and all the employees are standing around looking at Marilyn Monroe’s typewriter.”

In high-traffic displays, the typewriters are kept under cases, untouchable.

“When I’m (in Tuscaloosa), I’m certainly going to allow people to touch them,” Soboroff said. “People are so nervous! They’re looking for a delete button when they make a mistake. Hemingway would just scratch things out, so you can, too.”

The “Alabama Types” exhibit will be on display in the UA Gallery through Dec. 7; the First Friday opening will be 5-8 p.m. On Nov. 8, there’ll be a 1-3 p.m. “Meet Steve Soboroff and His Collection” reception, when the collector comes to visit. There are also a pair of staged readings affiliated with the event, performed through the UA Department of Theatre and Dance, in the black box theater at the Dinah. The first will be Capote’s original film script for “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,” 2 p.m. next Sunday, Nov. 4. Then at 6:30 p.m. Nov. 12 there’ll be a staged reading of UA theater professor Steve Burch’s work “Is My Verse Alive?” directed by Annie Levy and starring Kelley Schoger as Emily Dickinson.



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