



Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

It's been a busy few months trying to keep up with all the new releases of CDs and books (and books with CDs!) that arrived. Though retired, I'm still a CPA and it's been a busy tax season but I have some real goodies for you as usual. So, let's get started.

Catching up on a loose end - In March I told you about the 2023 musical version of the film *The Color Purple* and the giant gramophone in one scene. Well, on March 12th Warner Home Video released DVD and Blu-ray with lots of "bonuses." I still highly recommend the film which is filled with "jazz" numbers (and it is streaming on HBO Max), but if you want to dig deeper there is an option on one of the "extra features" to play just the musical numbers like a "playlist."

"Goin' to Kansas City" - In February I was invited back to the annual *Folk Alliance International Conference*,

which I've been attending since 2009. I did discover some artists playing old-style music and am awaiting their CDs. A few years ago I chaired a panel on using archives to find songs and again this year the Library of Congress' American Folklife Center ran a two-hour showcase where new artists could select a song and perform it. But two highlights were a panel on exploring the Woody Guthrie Archives (which featured Guthrie's granddaughter Anna Canoni) and the "Your Musical Legacy: What You Leave Behind" panel which included Terika Dean, the grandniece of the folk legend Lead Belly (Hudie Ledbetter) and manager of the Lead Belly Estate, speaking on how the recordings are administered. (A new documentary - *Lead Belly: The Man Who Invented Rock and Roll* was screened, It is still playing film festivals but here is link to the trailer: <https://tinyurl.com/5a8753dz>. I recorded part of that panel, and you can watch it here: <https://tinyurl.com/y5p3mkjp>. Both Guthrie and Lead Belly were inducted into the inaugural class of the Folk Americana Roots Hall of Fame (www.farhof.org) on April 20th.



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On the CD side - While looking at YouTube Channels of the 800+ artists who were scheduled to play over 2,000 short private showcases (plus 160 "official" ones), I discovered Joachim Cooder, the son of guitarist Ry Cooder, who plays an unusual

instrument: the Array Mbira (an electrified version of the kalimba, or thumb piano). More to the point, his latest CD, **Over The Road I'm Bound** (*Nonesuch*), is subtitled *The Songs of Uncle Dave Macon*, the legendary banjo player. I was anxious to see Joachim play selections live and I do recommend sampling the album if you are an Uncle Dave fan. You can also watch him perform here: <https://tinyurl.com/wdcx22pp>

I often recommend CD box sets from the British Acrobat label that, thanks to expired copyrights in the UK, compiles three or four-disc sets with great liner notes for well under \$18. One recent one, **Country Number Ones of the 40s**, uses the Billboard disc jockey charts to gather 73 recordings from the 78rpm era to 1949. The definition of “country” here is wide. There’s Bing Crosby with The Andrews Sisters, Bob Wills and his Texas Cowboys and, oddly, Lawrence Welk and his Orchestra with Red Foley. (Yep, it reached #1 on November 24th, 1945!) The book of well researched notes (by Paul Watts) is 32 pages in easy-to-read typeface.

By the time I received the “original cast recording” of the musical play **Harmony** (*Stiletto Records*), the show – which began off-Broadway, and transfer uptown, had closed. Originally previewed in 1997 in San Diego, it shuttered within a month and sat



until 2013 when it was revived and failed again (and again) until it hit Broadway in 2023, where – despite good reviews- it closed after a few months. The reason for including the cast album here is because of its subject: The Comedian Harmonists were an internationally famous, all-male German close harmony ensemble that performed and recorded between 1928 and 1934, before World War II. Their repertoire included folk songs, some classical vocals as well as popular songs. Because the five vocalists - who had perfect “harmony” in

their voices- and their sole accompanist (piano) were either Jewish or married to a Jewish woman, making a living (even staying alive) were threatened when Hitler took over. They never re-formed after the war. Some of their records have been issued on vinyl and CD but the two 1979 film documentaries on the group seem to not be available. So, it was songwriter Barry Manilow (yes, the guy famous for “I Write the Songs” and “Mandy”) who felt the CHs story needed to be told and, with playwright and lyricist Bruce Sussman, he created *Harmony*. The 24-page booklet enclosed in the package the full lyrics as well as a “synopsis” of the plot so you can follow along. Yes, there are some “Broadway” style songs but I, for one, am glad the recording was made before the show closed. To hear a 30-minute audio documentary on the CH, go here: <https://tinyurl.com/c8zvf76>

Folk Music – or Music for/by “Folk” – Thirty years ago, photographer, recording engineer and social services activist Tim Duffy founded the Music Maker Relief Foundation, a non-profit to both record and distribute the music by elderly musicians he discovered in North Carolina while studying folklore at UNC. Duffy learned that some “blues” artists were needing both money and health care as they aged. Like other talented musicians who could not make a living performing, and took jobs in fields and factories, it took Duffy to get their talents out to the world. He took musicians like “Guitar Gabriel” (born in 1925, recorded by Duffy in 1995 a year before he died) and Willa Mae Buckner (born 1922 and recorded 1994, died 2000) on the road to Europe and into the studio. He saw three young black musicians at a folk camp and recorded them for his label. They became the Grammy-winning Carolina Chocolate Drops and won a Grammy. Pictured is Brother Theotis Taylor, who sang gospel everywhere, from tiny churches to Carnegie Hall but continued to make his living as a turpentine farmer! Duffy got a lot of help from Taj Mahal and Eric Clapton. To celebrate the 30 years, Duffy teamed with *No Depression* magazine to publish ***Song Keepers: A Music Maker Anthology*** with text by NC author Georgann Eubanks to accompany Duffy’s amazing black and white photos. There are four CDs inserted in sleeves with 85 performances captured in Duffy’s studio (most not previously available). There is disc of electric blues, one of acoustic blues one of gospel, and finally one of “eclectic folk.” All proceeds go, of course, to the musicians so it’s a way to support these talent folks and discover some great entertainment.



You may remember me telling you about the Winter 2021 “*Public Domain*” issue of the **ARSC Journal**, that included a CD of ultra-rare tracks in all genres expertly transferred and with authoritative track notes. In April, a slightly-delayed Fall 2023 issue was sent to 2023 members. This included a second CD with 23 tracks of “recording firsts”. There is the “first recording of a Bar Mitzvah speech” (1914), the “first recording released of a banjo solo” (1899 on Berliner), “the first recording (one of five) of a Pygmy Chief” (1905) and an early – though admittedly not the “first” – song about airplanes (“Take Me Up With you Dearie” by Frank C. Stanley on an Indestructible cylinder from 1909). Lots of classical music but also the “first recorded political campaign song”: “Do We Want Him” by George W. Gaskin (an unnumbered wax cylinder from 1896). There are copies of the 2021 issue still for sale (www.ar-sc-audio.org) but only a few extra copies of this second CD issue were printed, so act fast if you want one. Full contents of that issue are listed on the aforementioned site.

And finally, the book arrivals – Thanks to a review in the *Wall Street Journal* by journalist Eddie Dean, I learned of a terrific book on two female “song catchers” who ventured to the rural homesteads in the South (mainly Florida and Alabama) from 1935-1937 as employees of the newly-created Resettlement Administration under



FDR’s plan to help folks during the Depression. After building “homesteads” as rural communities, the RA decided that it would be a good idea to send staff out with portable recording devices (and blank recordable discs) to collect both folk songs with lyrics, as well as instrumental tunes, to be used to educate other planned communities. The Music Division was headed by Charles Seeger (yep, Pete’s dad!) and, while you think of John Lomax when you hear the subject “field recording”, it was in fact two **women** – Sidney Robertson and Margaret Valiant - who did most of the recording. (Robertson collected 74 sides in just 3 days and over 400 record-

ings are in the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center, and 42 are available to hear on line- including an early version of the now-standard “Wayfaring Stranger”). Lomax, and his son John A Lomax, used these two women’s work and took credit for it. It was for folk music researcher Sheryl Kaskowitz to dig into the Library of Congress, Sidney Robertson Document Collection and write ***A Chance to Harmonize*** (subtitled: *How FDR’s Hidden Music Unit Sought to Save America from the Great Depression - One Song at a Time*) (Pegasus Books). If this highly-recommended volume (just 200-pages plus footnotes) If you interest in this story peaks after reading the book, I’ll suggest the video of her hour-long talk on Robertson on the LOC website at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021690351/> (sadly not yet on YouTube)

Well, that winds up this month. Have a wonderful and safe summer!

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