



Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

As I finish up this month's column I'm ready to head off to Baltimore, MD for the 52nd Annual ARSC Conference, where I hope to see at least some of you. A heads up for 2019 – especially for those on the West Coast. Next year's ARSC Conference will be in Portland, OR in May. Not a lot has been arriving since February but I think I've got things here for most of you. So let's get started.

A few “updates” on items in my March column – I reviewed the photo book *Folk Masters: A Portrait of America* which featured some NEA Heritage Fellows award winners. Shortly thereafter I received a new documentary, ***Extraordinary Ordinary People*** (*First Run Features*) on DVD, which is basically a film version of the book, with archival performances and recent interviews by many of the winners. You can see the trailer here: <https://tinyurl.com/y9bbgc44>. Author/musician Stephen Wade, whose CD I covered, has produced another fine one that will interest those into Appalachian fiddle tunes. In 1998, Wade (along with his banjo) accompanied mountain fiddler Alan Jabbour for an “educational recital” at the Library of Congress, where Jabbour, not only played songs that went back to the 1930s and earlier, but discussed their significance. The album, ***Americana Concert*** is on the Patuxent label. I finally was able to get the DVD for the film ***Song of Granite***, based on the life of Irish traditional singer Joe Heaney, which prominently features a wax cylinder recording session. It's an odd docu-drama which shows Heaney as a loner and there are lots of slow moments showing him walking the hills. The 2017 104-minute black and white film (produced with funding from the Canadian government), is on the Oscilloscope imprint and has an interview with the Director as a bonus. Honestly, the trailer (<https://tinyurl.com/yagabwpf>) is the most interesting thing to watch.

Traditional music lives on – with new “clothes” on recent CDs – It's been a dry six months or more when it comes to reissues of early recordings (with helpful liner notes) from labels like Dust-to-Digital and Archeophone (though the former has some scheduled for release in June). In the meantime I received some interesting albums which use old music to make new sounds. First up is ***Off The Beaten Trail*** (*self released*) by the Hot Texas Swing Band. The 13 tracks here mix cowboy songs with jazz to playing the “western swing” style of Bob Wills 78s. The nine-member group (plus vocalist Selena Rosanbalm) “swing” though standards like “Cow Cow Boogie” and add some originals too. Multi-instrumentalist and “songster”, Dom Flemons produced an exceptional album that pays tribute to African-American pioneers who settled in the west: ***Black Cowboys*** (*Smithsonian Folkways*). I've been a huge fan of Flemons (co-founder of The Carolina Chocolate Drops) and the 40-page booklet of essays and liner notes shows that he is a fine researcher as well. Another mini-education course in a CD digipak. Wynton Marsalis is certainly a modern “Renaissance man” with a career as a jazz trumpeter, composer (both jazz and classical), lecturer and non-profit Executive Director (Jazz at Lincoln Center). JALC now has its own label and its first release is ***United We Swing: Best of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Galas*** (*Blue Engine*). The 16 performances here are from the annual fundraisers from 2003 to 2007. (Some full

galas were released on DVD a few years ago). This may be the only time you see the names of Eric Clapton, James Taylor, Jimmy Buffet and Bob Dylan in this column but Marsalis and his septet make sure there is a jazz groove going.

Another name you wouldn't expect to see here either is that of John Oates. Yep, one half of the "blue-eyed soul" duo Hall & Oates. Well it turns out that, deep down, Oates is a classic blues fan and his biggest influences growing up were Mississippi John Hurt and Robert Johnson. So, using his name recognition he went in the studio last year to record an album titled **Arkansas** for the independent Thirty Tigers label. I caught Oates plying live in Philly and again at the huge Folk alliance Conference in February (where he spent two days mingling with the attendees). There are two John Hurt songs among the 10 tracks and two by Oates in the style of the 1920s. The lead-off track is the classic "Anytime", which was first recorded in in 1924 on OkeH by Emmett Miller. If those early blues are your thing, then check out this album.

Two Women Singers – one "hot", one "blue" – A few years ago I reviewed a "fictional" autobiography of vaudeville, film and recording legend Sophie Tucker. It was to be a biography written as though it was by Tucker herself. Long time collectors know that Tucker actually did self-publish her own autobiography in 1945. Well now comes still another book on the subject. **Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker** (Univ. of Texas Press), by "scholar" Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, is a 276-page volume (with 20% of the pages devoted to footnotes and an index, plus 16 pages of black and white photos) that reads like a research paper. The book flap notes that the author used "hundreds of scrapbooks that Tucker compiled" and they account for some of the footnotes. But many of the footnotes refer to Tucker's own bio and not a lot there is refuted. We all know that Tucker was a vaudevillian and recording star yet, the author seems to have used only digital recordings and not much (if any) video. Tucker is known mostly to an older generation (or a young generation of collectors of 78rpm records) and so the appearance of this "new" book in the Entertainment section of booksellers may pique some interest. But personally I found the author's writing style uninteresting. But then, again, if you are a Tucker fan, you may differ with me.

While I found the Tucker book somewhat disappointing, I found sitting through the World Premiere of a new musical play about singer Ella Fitzgerald, **Ella, First Lady of Song** as mounted by the Delaware Theatre Company, really frustrating. The musical, conceived and directed by Maurice Hines (half of the tap-dancing Hines Brothers), stars Freda Payne (you know her from her one-hit-wonder "Band of Gold") as Ella, with a live six-piece band on stage. There are two other actresses and one male actor, while the band members play multiple roles. The songs are fine (24 standards fill the two acts) but Payne is not Ella. Even worse is the script, in which we "learn" things like: Be-bop started in 1953 (it was 1942), we are in the Korean War in 1954 (it ended in 1953) and that Louis Armstrong (who made many records with Ella) spelled his name "Louie" (it was Louis). Oh, and there is not one dance number. I spoke with the young playwright after the performance and he contacted me later for "fact correction." Maybe this show will reappear somewhere, but we are still waiting for a decent play about Fitzgerald.

Inventors other than Thomas Edison – I'm afraid nothing new showed up for Edison collectors but there are two others worth covering. I discovered a quirky new DVD titled **E.L.E.T.T.R.A.** (*Dreamscape*). There have been a few documentaries made about Guglielmo Marconi, the Father of wireless communication, but this new 2015, 48-minute film consists mostly of an interview with his daughter, Princess Elettra, who inherited his "palace" in Bologna Italy when she was seven years old. (She was actually named after her father's yacht). The palace is now crumbling and Elettra is trying to save it – as well as promote the

work of her father (who received the Nobel Prize in 1909). Elettra – who became a real Princess when she married Prince Carlo Giovannelli in 1966 – was put in contact with Australian broadcaster Ben Starr and Starr traveled to Italy to meet with her and discuss her father’s accomplishments and tour the palace. We also hear from Elettra’s son – also named Guglielmo and his wife (who



appears to be an American). The quality of the film images make it look like it was filmed in the 1960s (though it was done in 2015). This is certainly something that radio historians and radio enthusiasts will want to see.

Next is Edison’s former employee – later his rival – Nikola Tesla. I’ve reviewed biographies and DVD documentaries on the man but now comes ***Tesla For Beginners***, described on the back cover as “A For Beginners Documentary Comic Book.” The 144-page paperback, has many black and white graphic illustrations but it is primarily text. And it’s a fun read. (Did you know that, while they were rivals, in 1916 the Swedish Academy awarded its highest medal, The Edison Medal, to Tesla? Read the book and learn more) Available on Amazon.com.



And now for something completely different - This month’s oddball find comes courtesy of Record Store Day, when record labels create VERY limited-edition releases (that immediately bring high prices on eBay.) This time the Delaware Dogfish Head Craft Brewery got the idea to release a “special” vinyl record by the band The Flaming Lips, filled with their Dragons & YumYums pale ale. I haven’t seen the final product but I’ve got a photo to share. I wonder if a com-

pany like Dust-to-Digital can issue a similar disc that plays at 78rpm and includes a recording of “Under The Anheuser Busch.”

Other news you can use – There’s a new book - *Bluegrass, Newgrass, Old-Time, and Americana Music (Pelican)*, music journalist Craig Harris, that was published on May 1st. It features interviews with 120 musicians and goes back to 1927 and Bill Monroe. I’ll have more to say in September. There’s a fabulous new documentary on the history of Black

Gospel – **How We Got Over** (with great rare footage) – that is still making the “film festival” circuit. I can hardly wait for it to arrive on DVD (with bonuses, I hope) so a wider audience can see it. Lastly, do you know about the streaming video service Kanopy? If you have a library card, and your local library subscribes (many do) you can “borrow” four films to stream for free each month. Through the service I discovered a fascinating documentary about a song we ALL have somewhere in our record collection, “Dixie”. The film is titled **Dixie: The True Story of America’s Most Dangerous Song**. You can see the extended trailer here: <http://ryankelley.net/films/>

Well, that does it for this month. Have a great summer and I’ll see you back here in September.

Steve Ramm, 420 Fitzwater St., Philadelphia, PA 19147 (e-mail: Stevenramm@aol.com).



SILENT GROOVES: FRANS JANSEN

Though his name may not be familiar to most APS members (unless you still have the MAPS Membership Directory that was published 18 years ago), but my friend Frans Jansen was a long time member of MAPS (which merged with APS) and continued as an APS member. He was one of the “International” members who make our hobby so exciting. Frans lived in The Netherlands and he and his wife of many years, Agnes, would travel to the US for the ARSC Conference, until Agnes became unable to travel. Though he had just turned 82, Frans was, like the population of the Netherlands, an avid bike rider. On March 15th, as he did every Thursday, he went on his bike to the antiques and book market at the Lange Voorhout in his home town The Hague. He got into a traffic accident, a collision with a truck, and died on the spot.



While he did not publish any articles in English in the American phonograph journals, Frans loved phonographs and especially cylinder records and was very active in the Dutch phono societies. As an expert on gramophones and recorded sound, tin packaging, and gas lights to name a few, his knowledge and engagement will be dearly missed, as well as the friendships he made with everyone who met him. It was by fate that I was in Amsterdam last May and so Frans and Agnes took the train into the city to have lunch with us. (There where this last photo I have of him was taken).

Frans leaves behind his adoring wife Agnes, three children and one grandchild. I know we all send our sincere condolences to his family. Rest in Peace my friend.

-- Steve Ramm