



Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

Nearly every one of my December columns, in the almost 25 years that I've been writing this column, has been a *Holiday Gift Wish List Guide*, with things my readers would want for Christmas/Hanukkah. This time it will not be as formal but virtually every item I review here should be on someone's list. So let's get started with some new items.

News on the 'Net – In October, 90 former employees of RCA Victor's Camden, NJ plant gathered together in "Nipper's Pub" in the old Building 17 (now an apartment building) to reminisce. You can read about it here: <http://tinyurl.com/jpmv54h>.

The *Phonographic Monthly Review* the first consumer magazine about the appreciation (and collecting) of records was founded in 1926 by Axel B. Johnson. It was published until March 1932. Thanks to the work of the National Recording Preservation Board, you can now read every issue online at www.archive.org or direct at <http://tinyurl.com/ht76nx9>.

The Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC), which will be holding its 51st Annual Conference in San Antonio, TX (where blues legend Robert Johnson made his first recordings) on May 10-13, 2017, has recently posted full videos from their New York Chapter presentations on the ARSC YouTube channel. While some are aimed at classical music collectors, the most recent is Dennis Rooney's talk on crooner Russ Columbo. You can find these at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/arscaudio>.



A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* on "antiquing" prominently featured the photo I'm including here of dual-horn phonograph. I can't tell if the woman in front is searching her pocket-book to buy it before the two guys beat her to it.

For collectors who also love *Downton Abbey* – I've been collecting phonograph related Christmas ornaments for the last 40 years but hadn't seen any new ones till recently. A company associated with Acorn Home Video is selling horn gramophone ornaments with the *Downton Abbey* name on the front. When last I looked, they were for sale for just \$2.99 (plus shipping) direct from Acorn. I've included a photo of one here. You can buy them on line at: <http://tinyurl.com/zsyg4uq>.



Up against the wall! – The city of Philadelphia (Pa) has become "a city of murals", since the Mural Arts Program began

in 1974 as the Anti-Graffiti Network. With over 3,000 murals on building walls it is the nation's largest public arts program. On October 24, the wall overlooking a parking lot at 7th and Fitzwater Streets became home to a mural honoring jazz guitarist Eddie Lang, whose home was on that site. Lang's musical partner, violinist Joe Venuti lived nearby and they both attended school a block away. As you will see in the illustration here, the artist, Jared Bader, put Lang front-and-center, with Venuti next to him. They are shown in front of the recording horn in the Okeh studios with Bing Crosby, Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, among others. The project was ignited by Philly photographer (and leader of the local Blackbird Society Orchestra) Richard Barnes.



Recording 78rpm Records: Then and Now – A bunch of really neat things arrived this fall which are devoted to the recording process from the early 20th century to today. All are well worth seeking out. First up is **The 78 Project Movie**. I've covered the "Project" – in which two record collectors (Alex Steyermark and Lavinia Jones Wright) took a journey across America, along with a Presto Disc Recorder to make "field recordings"(just like John and Alan Lomax did in the 1930s) of musicians in "one-take". Many of the musicians are well-known Holly Williams (Hank Sr.'s granddaughter), Victoria Williams (no relation), John Doe (from the alt-band X) and actor John C. Reilly. Interviewees include many reps from the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian. The 95-minute film first played film festivals but now it's on DVD from Kino Lorber with about 30 minutes of "bonus features". There are three full performances (filmed during the recording process) as well as a 12-minute interview with Don Fleming from the Association for Cultural Equity (which is the repository for the Lomax Archives) in New York. If you haven't seen the film yet, I encourage you to check it out. Speaking of recording current artists with old technology, I received the newest CD from Nashville-based Americana singer Tom Mason, **Pirate Party**, and normally it would not fit this column. But Mason's website has a great video of Mason and his Blue Buccaneers recording the last track on the album – "Pirate Song" – in a wax cylinder session helmed by collector/archivist Martin Fisher. The wax recording – which runs three minutes – is replaced by a studio version (4:42) for the CD release. You can see the cylinder session at <http://tinyurl.com/h98b9do> and learn more about Mason at www.tommason.net.

While we are still waiting for PBS to set a date for the multi-part series *American Epic*, in November PBS did air a major eight-hour series (10 years in the making). **Soundbreaking: Stories from the Cutting Edge of Recorded Music**, executive produced by Sir George Martin before his death. While each of the eight themed episodes spends more time on modern pop and rock, each goes back to the early years of recording for a brief period. For those who missed the show on TV, the good news is that it was also released on DVD (with about 30 minutes of bonus features) on the Athena imprint.

Three other reissue projects deserve your attention as well. Earlier this year I reviewed – and recommended – the deluxe four-disc and book set from Bear Family Records, *The Knoxville Sessions* - co-produced and compiled by researchers Ted Olson and Tony Russell. It was the third in the series that delved into the recordings in the late 1920s that created the "Big bang in country music". I finally received the second release (*The Bristol Sessions* – the Victor recordings was the first) – **The Johnson City Sessions 1928-29** – which concen-

trates on the recordings made for the Columbia label in the small Tennessee town not that far from either Bristol or Knoxville. The CDs contain every one of the 100 records released by the label (secured from private record collections) while the 136-page lavishly illustrated LP-size hardbound book, provides not only a history of the recording but also bios for all the artists who recorded for the label – even if their sessions were not released. The sound for nearly all the tracks here is beautifully recorded with virtually no surface noise. And 20 pages of the book are filled with the lyrics (so you can sing along). If you have the other two volumes in this series, you'll want to add this one (available on Amazon.com). The latest release from the award-winning Dust-to Digital label is **Washington Phillips and His Manzarene Dreams**. This 76-page 6x7-inch hardbound book contains a 16 track CD, representing all the released sides (of the 18 he recorded) made in Dallas, TX, in two sessions by this black gospel composer, singer and musician. His instrument was his own invention. Called a Manzarene, it was basically two zithers played together. And Phillips high-pitched voice was unique as well. Listening to the CD was a revelation for me. You need to hear it to understand. While you won't recognize his name, you may know his songs. Artists like Ry Cooder and Linda Ronstadt have recorded his songs and the two-sided "Denomination Blues" was retitled "That's All" by Sister Rosetta Tharpe and became her first recording with her electric guitar. I encourage you to listen to samples on the label's website (dust-digital.com) and discover Mr. Phillips. The last of the reissues is the 14th annual **Classic Blues Artwork from the 1920s Calendar and CD** created by rare-blues collector John Tefteller. It's a beautiful 12x12 wall calendar (with important historic blues events already filled in) using rare artwork from labels like Paramount, Vocalion and Gennett, complete with a 23-track, 74-minute audio CD with the recordings advertised, plus a bunch of rare bonus B-sides. Tefteller spends ten-of-thousands on a rare 78 and then has them transferred by top engineers and then adds to the calendar CD each year. For many folks, it's the CD that's important and the calendar is a bonus. Though he used new engineers (from the *American Epic* project) last year – and the sound improved, you should be aware that some of these recordings were pressed by budget labels and you should expect surface noise. Sides by Skip James, Blind Joe Reynolds and two bonus-tracks by Ishman Bracey are particularly noisy. The title is the same as always but a few of the tracks are from the 1930s and there's even one from 1949. This is a must-have for early blues collectors. (www.bluesimages.com)

If you collect Gennett jazz or blues 78s you will want the newest book in Arcadia Press's *Images of America* series. While many of their books are just historic photos with short captions, **Gennett Records and Starr Piano** is much more. Sure, there are two black and white photos on each of the 128 pages of this 6.5x9-inch paperback book, but the text for each is lengthy and compiled by sound recording history professor Charlie Dahan and most of the images come from his co-author Linda Gennett Irmscher. Irmscher is the great-granddaughter of Henry Gennett, who founded the piano company in Richmond VA in 1872 and, in 1915, began a recording division. The source of each photo is provided and you will see that most come from the Gennett family archives,. This is another must-have book for 78 collectors. And, though not a reissue, a neat CD I received from the UK with the long title of **Mr. Martin Simpson & Mr. Dom Flemons Proudly Present A Grand Musical Entertainment** (*Fledgling Records*) will certainly entertain you (well, it did me) with new arrangements of traditional songs like "Stealin'" and "Champagne Charlie" by this two talented "folk music" performers.

Edison or Tesla? , A/C or DC? – Earlier this fall PBS aired an episode on Edison's employee – and later his rival – Nikola Tesla, as part of its *American Experience* series. It is now on DVD from PBS Home Video. The excellent 54-minute documentary, narrated by actor Michael Murphy, refers to Tesla as an "idiosyncratic genius". He arrived in New York in

1884 (at age 28) – five years after Edison invented the electric light bulb - to work for his idol, but quit after six months because he believed the future was “alternating current”, while Edison’s concept was “direct current”. I was unfamiliar with the “commentators” used, who were only described as “historian”, “physicist” or “biographer”. A week after watching the DVD a new book, ***Tesla for Beginners*** (*forbeginnersbooks.com*) arrived. The 146-page paperback is a fun read with clever illustrations, and spends about 15 pages on Tesla’s interactions with Edison. And for something to share with your young kids/grandkids, there’s a new CD, ***The Rocket Went Up*** by a trio named The Deedle Deedle Dees, which features Edison on the cover and contains a fun song “Tesla vs Edison” in a fun “rap battle”. It’s self-released so check it out at : www.thedeedledeedledees.com.

A well-researched (and graphically beautiful) book on records from Eastern Europe. –

In 2003, Czech collector Gabriel Gossel authored a gorgeously illustrated exhibition catalog (*When The Comet Hits Us*) which I still refer to often. I just received a copy of Gossel’s latest project: a collaboration with fellow researcher Filip Sir titled ***Recorded Sound in The Czech Lands 1900-1946*** (*The Moravian Library*). This is the first comprehensive book documenting the record industry in the Czechoslovak Republic. The cut-off date of 1946 is when the record industry was “nationalized” in Czechoslovakia. The 207-page paperback begins with a somewhat haughty five page *Foreword* by someone from the Masaryk University but then the authors spend the next 70+ pages explaining how recordings (including those of Berliner, Edison and Victor) made outside the Czech Lands were issued there. There are footnotes and wonderful color graphics. The rest of the book is filled with reproductions of labels, cylinder record boxes, needle tins and advertisements, each with an explanation. The book is completely in English. I was told by the authors that the print run was limited to 100 copies (that seems so small), but they do hope to make it available for free online via archive.org next year. I will provide an update when I receive it. Sadly this is a book you can’t easily add to your wish list.



A landmark DVD release on early Black Films – “Race Films” or “Black Cast Films” – produced, directed and distributed by African-Americans - filled a need in the film industry in the 1920s,30s and 40s. Yet very few survive today. These were silent, as well as sound, films often produced on low budgets but they capture the everyday life of this ethnic community. Film historian Charles Musser – who, along with the Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art – created the landmark DVD set on Edison films years ago for Kino Lorber, have done a similar task on the newly released five-disc Bluray set ***Pioneers of African-American Cinema***. With 19 digitally restored feature films (plus new scores for the silent) and lots of bonuses and interviews, this is a magnificent collection. And, though Paul Robeson is represented here in a SILENT film (*Body and Soul, 1925*), many of the later films contain night club scenes with music and dancing. If I didn’t have this set already, it would be at the top of “Gift Wish List”

I hope you all have a happy (and, more importantly, healthy) holiday season. I’ll be back next year!

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