

# Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

I don't know what the weather is like where you are but, for me, I've been hanging indoors and catching up on listening and reading and, in the last few months, some great stuff has arrived to share. So let's get started.

**A totally immersive (multimedia) course in blues history in Memphis** – I was hoping to cover this in my December “holiday wish list” column but it arrived just a few days after my deadline.

If you still have some money left over after the holidays, and are serious about early blues records, this is something special. The pre-eminent German-based re-issue label, Bear Family Records, periodically releases massive box sets with over a dozen CDs and a beautiful well-researched book. These sets are not inexpensive, but they are thorough. The latest - **The Memphis Blues Box** - weighs in at **EIGHT POUNDS**, and includes 534 tracks(!) on 20



CDs, plus an LP-sized 360-page hardbound book with over 880 photos. The period covered runs from 1914 (the Victor Military Band performing “The Memphis Blues”) through 1969 (Ike and Tina Turner’s “Mean Old World”). The last track is a recording of “Walk Right In” by Gus Cannon recorded in 1963, while Cannon’s recordings in the set go back 35 years to 1928 (on Disc2). The 78era fills the first 17 discs and the 45s and LP tracks the last three. There are a few introductory essays, followed by lengthy biographies for **every artist** here and detailed, well-researched “liner notes” for every track – plus a color image of each record label. The compilers often list the number of copies sold (often under 800 copies) so you know this material is rare! The transfers are excellent in most cases. Some of the rarest are not “hi-fi” but the processing limit is appropriate. I’ve had the set for about a month, as I write this review and I’m still only a third of the way through it. This is truly the “definitive” collection on the “blues” created in Memphis, whether acoustic, electric, hokum, or gospel. Bear Family has posted a four-minute video on YouTube to advertise the set. I think this will expand on my review: <http://tinyurl.com/yr4m7vr3> Available on Amazon and other online music sites.

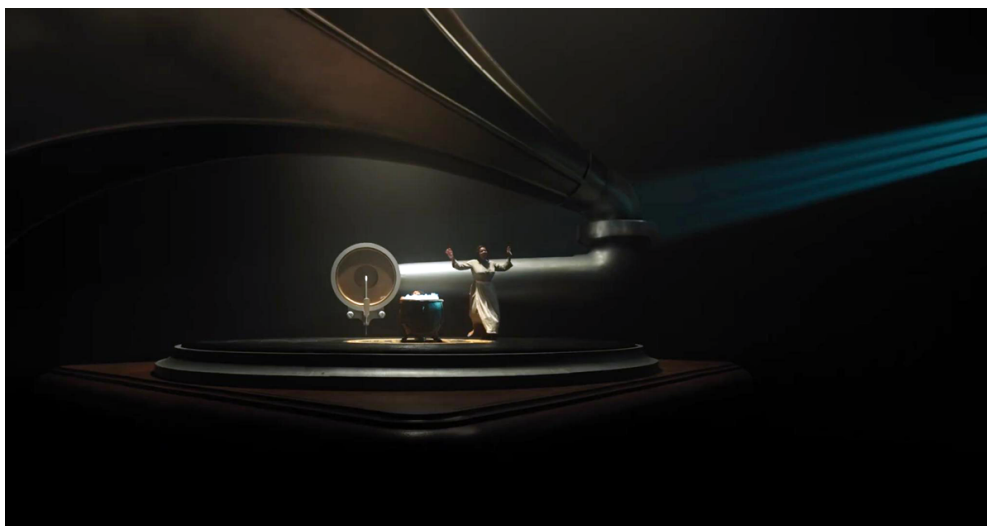
**Where can you hear more than \$50,000 in rare records for only 20 bucks? –**

Now I know that many of my readers can't afford the BFR box set but I'll remind you again (as I do every year – especially for new readers) that longtime mail-auction seller Kurt Nauck has been playing almost 15 hours of mostly-rare cylinders and discs twice a year on his **Vintage Record Auction (VRA) Radio Show** online. Nauck decided years ago to make the shows available on a CD-ROM (which includes the hour-long tracks plus scans of the labels and a pdf of the catalog). The sound is better than the streaming version while allowing you to listen whenever you want. And the price is just \$20! (There is now even a "track list" and a fully searchable list showing which VRA a record appeared in.) Nauck has a policy to play a recording only once and some of these recordings are so rare that less than 10 copies are known to survive. I'm now listening to the most recent Naucktion (#74- CDs exist for VRA 39-74) and there are records with minimum bids of \$1.00 to \$10,000. Nauck and his team do not talk over any recording. Here is the URL to see the 167 page (!) list of every record available on the CDs: <http://tinyurl.com/ccmr8xsn>. This is a great tool in itself. You can order the shows and see more at [www.78rpm.com](http://www.78rpm.com)

**A REALLY big gramophone on the movie screen - *The Color Purple* (2023)**

opened in theaters last Christmas. I had not read the Alice Walker book, seen the Steven Spielberg 1985 film, or either of the 2005 or 2015 Broadway musical versions before seeing the new film. The film's score combines elements of classical and period jazz, blues, and gospel, and features several popular songs of the 1880s. The score was by Quincy Jones with a selection of original 78s on the soundtrack.

About halfway through the film (which I enjoyed) comes a "dream sequence" where the character of Shug Avery, a nightclub blues singer, performs a song on a GI-ANT horn gramophone. The number must last about five minutes, but it is soooooo creative. Look close-



ly at the image I've provided, and you will see Shug in front of the tone arm. I also found a video clip from a press screening where the creators discuss the creation of that scene, you will find that here: <http://tinyurl.com/3v98tcjs> It's 36 minutes long but worth watching. The movie is no longer on the "big screen" but coming to Blu-ray and DVD in March, watch for a review in my next column.

**A terrific video course on the Banjo –** In the past I've recommended select video "courses" on music from the company The Great Courses. They came on DVD with a course guide. The company is renamed Wondrium and offers the courses as physical DVDs or to stream on line or on your TV. Because of the cost of mechanical rights for any pre-recorded music used, most of their music courses are devoted to



classics. But now comes a five-hour course, ***The Banjo: Music, History, and Heritage*** taught by multitalented Rhiannon Giddens, co-founder of the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Giddens, now living in Ireland, is a researcher, composer, musician, and songwriter and, by using her own music, as well as “traditional” tunes, she is able



to illustrate each of the 10 half-hour lessons with performances by herself (and her daughter), plus fellow fiddlers and banjo players (including Bela Fleck, who takes the instrument into the 21<sup>st</sup> century). There are lessons devoted to the banjo in Africa, the Caribbean, Ireland and American minstrel, vaudeville and on to bluegrass. Four bonus performances fill out the program. This course

(partially funded by the Nonesuch Records label) has no printed guide, just the DVD. There is a sample lesson from the course to watch here on YouTube: <http://tinyurl.com/yj2jbc96>. And you can order here: [www.wondrium.com](http://www.wondrium.com)

**Another batch of bargain priced (but high quality) CDs of vintage records** – In the past I’ve turned you on (I hope) to the terrific multi-disc “box sets” from the British Acrobat label. Because of British copyright law, all recordings before 1963 are in the public domain. This allows the label to put as many as 100 78rpm sides onto four discs, add a 30+ page book of well researched liner notes, full discographic info (dates, personnel, label number) and still charge less than \$20. The transfers are usually fine (a few rare ones may have some noise) and the notes are all by a guy named Paul Watts, who, when he uses an internet source, gives credit where credit is due. This month I have two “collections” for you. First is ***Ruth Etting: All the Hits and More 1926-37***, with 71 sides on three CDs from her all-too-brief career (before she retired to Colorado, where she died in 1978). The booklet is smaller than other Acrobat sets – only 24 pages. The second is ***America’s Greatest Your Hit Parade Hits 1936***, a four-CD collection with 98 tracks including **every** “Top 14 hit” from 1936. Most of these were big bands with well-known vocalists (too many to list here). The 40-page booklet has Watts’ notes for each and every track. From the other major reissue label, Germany’s Bear Family Records, comes ***The Hank Williams Connection – 33 Roots and Covers of Hank Williams***, with recordings from the 40s to the 60s by folks like Pee Wee King, Louis Armstrong (“Cold Cold Heart”), and Hank’s widow Audrey (“Honky Tonkin”). The variety is wide (a Swedish surf band, The Spotniks, give their take on “Hey Good Lookin’”), but it’s a fun comp. The 38 pages of track notes give you background on each performer. (All CDs available from usual sources)

**For the Bookshelf (well, after you read them first!)** – The Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville has partnered up with the University of Illinois Press to republish some earlier books that were new to me. All are in paperback versions. For early country fans is ***My Husband, Jimmie Rodgers*** by “The Singing Brakeman’s” widow Carrie Rodgers. Written in 1975, the 222-page book was the first published bio of

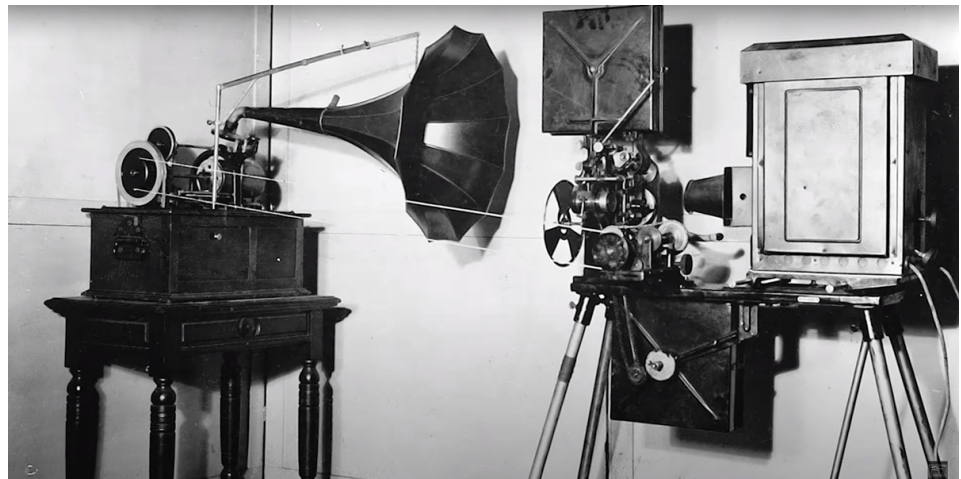
the country icon. Next is **Bob Wills : Hubbin' It**, a slim 100-page bio of the western swing pioneer first published in 1993. Moving into more “modern country” is the **Life and Times of Patsy Cline**” at 326-pages, the 1993 book is the longest.

Until I researched it, I was sure there had been a deeply researched biography of jazz icon Ella Fitzgerald, whose career began in the 1930s with Chick Webb’s band (she later helmed her own). Well, apparently not. But music history professor (now retired) Judith Tick has filled that gap with the 560-page bio **Becoming Ella Fitzgerald: The Jazz Singer Who Transformed American Song** (WW Norton). I’m only halfway through the 460 pages of text – there are nearly 100 pages of footnotes! – but I’m learning a lot more than I knew from prior books.

For blues fans, there is **Deep inside the Blues: Photographs and Interviews** (Univ. Press of Mississippi Press), that, at over five pounds, actually requires a table to lay it on to read, is the heaviest book I can remember reading. It compiles 30 interviews that researcher Margo Cooper conducted over thirty years with both known and unheralded musicians, accompanied by over 160 of her black and white photos. The larger portion of the interview subjects are/were from The Delta, though there are seven from the Hill Country and four from Chicago. These are not performers who toured the country or the world, but they have a lot to say. Cooper’s photos, however, include folks like Bobby Rush, Junior Wells and Buddy Guy.

**Cylinders and Cinema** – Over the years I’ve reviewed and recommended the classic film DVDs and Blu-rays on the Flicker Alley imprint. They find rare films and restore them to near-pristine condition.

They have now decided to stream some films both on their own platform and via a Vimeo channel on Roku or Amazon Firestick in a series of 10 films titled **Facets of Film**. First is one you’ll want to see. It’s a 2021 hour-long documentary titled **Cinema Finds Its**



**Voice**, look at the graphic I provided. You can watch the “trailer” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JdhaIJWn-g> and sign up at <http://tinyurl.com/9brksv>

Well, that’s all there is room for this month. Stay warm, stay safe and enjoy your records.

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