



Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

An apology and correction – Before I start this month’s column, I want to make a correction in an item in my December column. In saying that collector and chemical engineer Don Wilson has “gone out of business” I implied that he was not only no longer producing his reproduction discs (a lot of time and effort) but also that he discontinued making his electric cylinder player. The latter is not true – in fact there was an ad for Don’s machine in the same issue! My apologies to Don. You can read about his **Wilson Home Electronic Cylinder Phonograph** at <https://wilsonmaterials.com/cylinder-player>

“Nipper” comes to Camden County, NJ – In 2005 the community of Moorestown, NJ created a charity art project to have 30 statues of Nipper created and displayed throughout the town for a month. They were then auctioned off and went to private homes and businesses in the area. (One was purchased by developer Carl Dranoff and resides in the lobby of the Victor Lofts in what was Building 17 of the Victor Talking Machine Company in downtown Camden. (You can see an 8-minute video of the statues and audition here: <https://tinyurl.com/2p9ds44d>). Well, Moorestown resident entrepreneur/musician Graham Alexander, who bought the trademark for the VTMC in 2016 and turned a closed savings bank in Berlin, NJ (in Camden County but 20 miles from Camden City) into the museum/performance space *The Victor Vault*, has done the unusual. He found a descendent of Nipper’s original owner, painter Francis Barraud, who allegedly unearthed the original Nipper’s bones and is having them sent to the US to be interred in a **Nipper Memorial Garden** next to the Victor Vault this spring. The story is too long to tell here so I’ll refer you to an article in *the Philadelphia Inquirer*. <https://tinyurl.com/8cjr5acc>. (I’ll be invited to the event and will report on it here.)

What records did our Presidents collect? – I know Jimmy Carter was a fan of jazz (he held the first – and only – White House Jazz Festival) and Barack Obama loved R&B and played it on his phone, but, until I saw an article in the extremely interesting *Library of Congress Bulletin* (free to subscribe to at <https://tinyurl.com/3fdm5mhx>), I did not know there is an official **White House Record Library**. It was started in 1976 by the Recording Academy. You can read all about it here: <https://tinyurl.com/37969jbc> with further info from an NPR story here: <https://tinyurl.com/3r73xuyu>

Now for some video treats - In 2017 a film was made for Tennessee Public TV about “the big bang in country music”, the 1927 “Bristol Sessions” that gave the world the first recordings by Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family. This film - **Born In Bristol** – is now available



for free streaming on the Ditty TV network. You should be able to find it on the Ditty TV channel on your Roku or you can go to this direct link: <https://dittytv.com/borninbristol/>. It's live action based on fact and runs about 50 minutes.

I'm sure you have all heard of Florence Foster Jenkins, the eccentric singer (???) who actually bought out Carnegie Hall for a night to make her CH debut and recorded "private label records". There have been one-woman plays based on her life and there was even a 2016 feature film starring Meryl Streep (with Hugh Grant).

**Journal Music Critic
Reports on Funniest,
Saddest of All Concerts**

By RICHARD S. DAVIS
Of The Journal Staff

New York, N. Y.—Man and boy, your correspondent has sat enthralled at heaven knows how many concerts, but never in this life has he communed with music in the manner of Wednesday night in old Carnegie hall. This was something you would never believe. This was the song recital of Florence Foster Jenkins.

Mme. Jenkins, if you haven't heard, and the chances are you haven't, is a lady who gives song recitals because there's no law against it. Up to this year it has been her

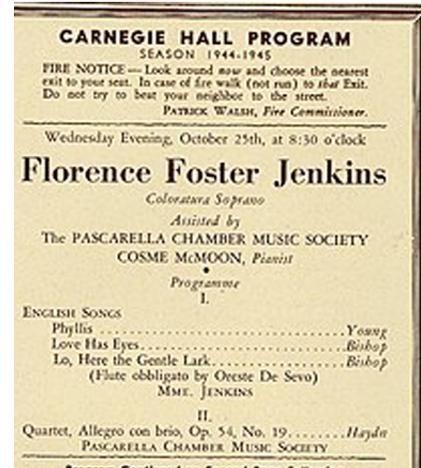
feaze her? Not for a single measure. Possibly she didn't hear. Some of her admirers of longest standing say the lady is quite deaf and even more nearsighted. They say she mistakes the ground swell at the rear as surging applause that cannot wait till her song has ended. Anyway, she has frequently said to the loyal:

"I'm putting you down rather close to the front. There's always so much noise farther back."

This autumn, for some reason, Mme. Jenkins decided to have done with small houses and intimacy. Carnegie hall was engaged and outside, on the sidewalk, there was placed an enormous portrait of the

That same year an independent documentary, **The Florence Foster Jenkins Story**

(Dreamscape) was produced and it was released last fall on DVD. Interviews with renowned vocal music experts are mixed with some recreations, archival recordings (yes they are hard to sit through) and audio interviews with her last husband. It's an interesting 90 minutes or so for those who want to know more about "the greatest worst singer of all time."



While searching through my PBS Passport streaming account, I found a wonderful documentary titled **Chasing Voices: The Story of John P. Harrington** (Vision Maker Media). Harrington was an American linguist and ethnologist, who, during a 50-year career, documented over 150 native languages of indigenous Indians (all across the US) by having them record on to wax cylinders and using other native Americans to help him transcribe over a million pages of notes. Just the rare filmed images of the cylinder recording machines (see graphic) will fascinate you. (It did me) But knowing the languages would otherwise be lost is heartwarming. You can see a trailer for the 50 minute film here: <https://visionmakermedia.org/chasing-voices>, and search your PBS Passport channel for the full program.



Now it's CD time - Last June I wrote about some privately released CD produced by singer/songwriter/journalist/record producer Chip Deffaa who has 39 albums to his credit, with rare recordings – many from “live” radio broadcasts - of George M. Cohan and Al Jolson among others. In December Deffaa sent me a few more, two of which I wanted to share with you. The first is **Al Jolson: King Of Broadway** (*Garrett Mountain Records*), which packs 35 recordings from the 1920s though the 1946 film release of *The Jolson Story*. These are not just solo performances. George Jessel appears a few times in duet and then there are ladies like Martha Raye and Peggy Lee. The second CD, **Al Jolson Sings Irving Berlin** (*same label*) has 31 tracks – again mostly from radio) with Jolson joined by Ethel Merman, Ginger Rogers or Sophie Tucker. Jolson was relaxed and at his best here, when retakes were not needed. Deffaa fills the tri-fold insert with detailed liner notes (warning: a magnifying glass will be helpful). You can feel his love for the music in his writing. (Order on Amazon or contact the producer at footloose518@aol.com).

It's been five years since I last reviewed an album by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra; I guess Director Rick Benjamin was looking for more rare orchestrations. Well, the newest CD **Deuces Wild!** (*Pro*) was worth the wait There are 25 selections on the 76-minute CD (no it's not available on download or vinyl) with waltzes, cakewalks, and rags from 1899 to 1902. There's even the “Victor Talking Machine March” by Arthur Pryor from 1904! The real gem here is the final track. It's an eight-minute “WORD PREMIERE” recording of *La-La Lucille*, George Gershwin's first “Overture”! Benjamin goes all-in with PRO releases. The packaging is gorgeous, the audio just perfect and – as an educator/lecturer - he fills the enclosed 12 page booklet with authoritative notes (Again, I recommend having a magnifying glass nearby) To order, listen, or learn more, go to: <https://paragonragtime.com/store/deuces-wild-album/>

If you loved the two Carter Family collections from the British Acrobat label I think you'll enjoy **The Cisco Houston Collection 1944-61** (*Acrobat*), a new FIVE CD collection with 122 sides by the singer/actor/radio host best known for traveling with Woody Guthrie, Lead belly, and Pete Seeger. All come from labels owned by Moses Asch. The 24-page booklet is filled with well researched notes by Paul Watts (and, again, you'll need that magnifying glass!). There is virtually no video footage of Houston but you can see him sing a familiar song from a 1951 TV show here: https://youtu.be/wNy5GU3Dt_o



From the Bookshelf – I've got three books for you this month and a preview of another coming in the spring. First come **Blues on Stage: The Blues Entertainment Industry in the 1920s** (*Excelsior Editions – SUNY Press*), a 236 page paperback by
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musicologist/musician John Clark Jr. There are standard blues singers we all know who played vaudeville (the “Smiths”: Clara, Mamie, Trixie and of course Mamie) And then there are guys like Lonnie Johnson, Blind Blake and duos like Butterbeans & Susie. The hokum and double-entendre lyrics are discussed as well. It’s an easy read with a large index of songs and artists.

The second new book ***When Broadway Was Black: The Triumphant Story of the All-Black Musical that Changed the World*** (*Sourcebooks*) by pop culture expert Caseen Gaines was one I was looking forward to as it focuses in on *Shuffle Along*, the first all-black musical on Broadway, since I co-produced the CD of the unstaged 1950 version of the show. As I started to read it, *deja vu* came over me. Then I went to my bookshelf and found it is actually an “updated version” of Gaines’ book *Footnotes: The Black Artists who Rewrote The Rules of the Great White Way*, published just a year earlier! The earlier book had 422-pages while the new one has 490 pages (and is an inch shorter in height). In both books mention is made of the 1952 production – which closed after just eight performances, but neither mention the 1950 version, whose “backers audition” disc produced the Grammy winning CD. So, while I can recommend either book for those interested in “Black Broadway”, I do have to say that if you bought *Footloose*, you don’t need the new version.

Early New Orleans jazz (actually much early jazz before 1917) was created by “creoles of color” such as Kid Ory and Jelly Roll Morton. The creoles were blacks who came south from Canada – and helped form the “musical gumbo” of NOLA music. They then took it north to Chicago (where Ory joined Louis Armstrong’s Hot Fives and the French influence was obvious. In ***Jazz a la Creole: French Creole Music & The Birth of Jazz*** (Univ. Press of Mississippi) music scholar Caroline Vezina compiles and analyses NOLA French music from plantation and work songs though music created in Congo Square through vaudeville and then jazz. The first 120 pages of this 236-page softbound book tell the story with the remaining pages filled with detailed footnotes, a bibliography, a “selected discography” and an index.

I’ll leave you with a preview: It’s been years since a history of recorded sound, incorporating the recent events such as research on the phonograph by the First Sounds Collective. Coming in May is ***Into the Groove : The Story of Sound From Tin Foil to Vinyl*** (Bloomsbury Sigma) by British audio enthusiast Jonathan Scott. I’m waiting for the final version (and will cover it as soon as it arrives).

Well, that’s all the room for now. Please send comments and discoveries you find to me. I’ll see you in June.

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