



# Anything Phonographic

by Steve Ramm

At the end of my column in the last issue, I mentioned the fascinating new venture, *The 78 Project*, where contemporary artists are recording their songs on 78s. They issued a 12-inch vinyl Lp record, listed as *Volume 1*, with 13 of the direct-to-78rpm recordings of traditional folk songs performed by well-known contemporary artists like Richard Thompson and Roseanne Cash. There's also a documentary film on the project making the rounds at film festivals. I hope to be able to report more on the film in my next column. Meanwhile here's the website: [www.the78project.com](http://www.the78project.com).

**Phono-GRAPHICALLY speaking** – Since my last listing, I attended the American Library Association's Annual Conference and found some more books that I think you'll get a kick out of. All are "children's" (well "young readers" books) but all are beautifully illustrated. Three famous black recording artists each get their own volumes. The smallest (and thinnest) is a biography of Ella Fitzgerald is titled *Skit-Scat Raggedy Cat (Candlewick)* by Roxanne Orgill. The 42-page paperback follows Ella from dancing for spare change to becoming the first lady of jazz. In *Josephine (Chronicle Books)*, author Patricia Hruby Powell, uses a "jazzy" style of prose to tell Baker's story from when she was young and poor until when she was old (and poor again, after adopting 12 multi-ethnic and multi-racial children and spending money to raise them). The 104-page hardbound book includes additional bio text at the end. The legendary Billie Holiday is profiled in *Mister and Lady Day (Harcourt)* a slim 32-page hardbound book that spends more time on her dog (Mister) than on the singer. At least, in the full page essay on the last page, author Amy Novesky acknowledges Holiday's drug habit and eventual prison sentence. There isn't a lot of text, but the illustrations are neat. The winner among my finds is not a bio but a light piece of fiction titled *Herman and Rosie (Roaring Book Press)* written and illustrated by Gus Gordon. Herman is an crocodile who likes to play jazz and Rosie is a deer who loves to sing. Both live in the "animal inhabited" city of New York and within the brief 32 pages of this hardbound book they find happiness together. The front and back cover are designed like a 10 inch 78rpm record and you'll find a few record players in the beautiful color illustrations. While it's listed as a children's book, the illustrations make it something my readers might enjoy too.



**New CD reissues (mostly from the UK)** – The reissue labels were a little slow in recent months to provide new releases but three imports (via Music Video Distributors), and one from the US, are worth mentioning. All three UK titles, coincidentally, are from the British Acrobat label, which jam-packs each of its CDs with roughly 75 minutes of music and some decent liner note essays. First up is the aforementioned Ella Fitzgerald. In 2012 I reviewed *Volume 1* in *The Ella Fitzgerald Collection* which spanned the period 1938-45. Now comes *Volume 2*, which dovetails the earlier volume with a whopping 97 sides recorded from 1936-55 (the end of her Decca contract), spread over four discs without any repeats from the earlier volume. As with the previous release, the 16-page booklet lists recording

dates, matrix numbers and personnel along with an informative five-page essay by Geoff Wilding. At just two CDs, *The Clarence Williams Collection* is smaller, but no less comprehensive, with sides from 1921-1937 showcasing Williams' various bands (his Blue Five, Jazz Kings and Washboard Band) along with some solo tracks and duets with James P. Johnson. There are vocals by Bessie Smith, Victoria Spivey and Williams' wife Eva Taylor among the 50 tracks here. The 12-page booklet has all the session data and a nice four-page essay on the recordings, though the compiler and annotator is not identified. A name often overlooked when it comes to crooners of the 1930s is Al Bowlly, who started his career in Britain but made 50 sides in the US from 1934 on for Victor. *The Al Bowlly Collection* covers the years 1927-41 and packs 100 performances (most from discs, but with a few radio transcriptions too) on to four CDs. (Bowlly made over 1,000 recordings during his lifetime yet, today his name rarely crops up among collectors.) The 16-page booklet has a six page essay (again uncredited). Of the three Acrobat sets, this one has the most varied sound quality with some very noisy tracks. Another "issue" with these Acrobat CDs sets is that they are released on CD-Rs, which some older CD players do not play properly. I can recommend the first two sets if your CD player can accept CD-Rs. I, as well as other collectors, have hoped that Acrobat would actually press their CDs so that they could reach a wider audience.

When it comes to a quality CD reissues there is never a question about those being produced by sound engineer Ward Marston for his own label. His prior releases of early Edison cylinders of opera singers (including the highly-recommended *Edison Trials*) are masterpieces and the packaging and documentation is always first rate. The newest release *John McCormack: A Star Ascending- Odeon Recordings 1906-1909 (Marston)*, will have even wider appeal than earlier sets. Tenor McCormack is popular among record collectors for his Irish ballads and popular songs for HMV and Victor. Nearly every 78rpm record collection contains a few McCormack discs. But, before he became a "star", he was making recordings at age 22 for the British Odeon company. These were ballads and the folk songs as well as operatic arias; in all, 82 sides. And he did not just record discs. He made seven wax cylinder records for the Sterling label in 1906 as well (most announced as "J.S. McCormack, Sterling Record"). Marston has transferred these 89 records (and located two "alternate takes" for two of the cylinders for this set) using the best available copies from the best private collections, and adjusted the speed based on pitch. As always there is great book of liner notes; in this case it's a 68-page booklet with photos and essays on the recordings as well as the song texts. (I could wish for a larger format book with larger typeface but that would be more costly to produce, I'm sure.) Anyone with an interest in McCormack will want this collection. Note that Marston sells "subscriptions" to his releases and many titles sell out early. ([www.marstonrecords.com](http://www.marstonrecords.com))

**Want to hear some \$1,000 records?** – Because of the new combined publication, I'm reaching many new collectors as readers. I want to make you aware of a wonderful resource to hear recordings you may never be able to afford. I think most collectors know about Kurt Nauck and his semi-annual Vintage Record Auctions, which are celebrating their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Most are aware that Nauck presents a seven-hour internet-only radio show just prior to each auction closing, where he plays "bidder requests". This lets his customers hear the quality before they bid. But he also plays those records that often sell for \$500 to \$1,000. Even the lesser valued records are fun to hear. What's neat is that you can buy CDs or CD-MP3 versions of all the past auctions from Nauck and play the recordings over and over again. I only wish there was an index of the title and artist or each set, but maybe someone will produce one. In the meantime, you can order from [www.78rpm.com](http://www.78rpm.com).

**Some fun internet URLs to check out** – Here are a few I discovered in the last few months that I think you'll enjoy: Pioneer black recording artist George W. Johnson's "Laughing Song" just made the National Recording Registry and Johnson biographer Tim Brooks was interviewed on NPR in this three-minute interview: <http://tinyurl.com/m2daf3r>. An amazing collection of over 500 home wax recordings,

assembled over 40 years by collector David Giovanonni was acquired by the Univ. of California- Santa Barbara and have been digitized and placed on line at: <http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/homewax.php>. Fascinating stuff! And all Nipper fans will want to see the You Tube of Nipper “running amok” at <http://youtu.be/5WJEbbVVVosw>.

**On the Bookshelf** – This month I have three books to alert you to, though you’ll need some sturdy book shelves to store the first two, between using them for research or reference. Both of these come from the well-respected publisher, The Scarecrow Press. First up is *The Encyclopedia of Great Popular Song Recordings* by Steve Sullivan. Each of the two hardbound large-format volumes that form the set fills 500-plus pages ( 1016 total!) and contains essays on over 1000 “key recordings” (the publisher’s words) from 1899 to “ the present”. The 10 chapters are called “Playlists” and are the author’s random definition of style. Examples are: *Crazy Blues 1906-2004* which goes from Billy Murray’s “Grand Old Rag” to Green Day’s “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” and *Jazznocracy 1897-2010*, with “Poor Mourner” by Cousins & DeMoss (an 1897 Berliner disc) through “Love The Way You Lie” by Eminem, featuring Rhianna. See what I mean. Some (not all) of the criteria for inclusion is based on sheet music sales, Grammy Awards and NPR’s list of 300 most important recordings. Most essays average half of a page and provide the label, record number and either date of recording or chart date (but rarely both.) Black and white stock photos are spread throughout the text. Because of the random grouping nature of the entries, there is a title and name index in the back of *Volume 2* that runs 100 pages! Those interested in discographic info won’t find it here but the essays are well written and you just might discover some records you never knew existed. The other book is nearly 50% longer and covers a shorter time span. *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* by Henry T. Sampson clocks in at 1561 pages (!) and is actually the “Second Edition” of this tome first published in 1980. The period covered, the end of the Civil War through the 1930s hasn’t expanded but the info has. The 10 chapters cover subjects like *Pioneer Black Show Producers*, *Cabaret and Night Club Reviews 1901-1940*, as well as minstrel and carnival show and vaudeville many of which featured artists who made early recordings. Parts are the book are the author’s own words, while others just quote period press reviews. There are 500 “rare” black and white photos spread throughout the book. The 50-page index will help guide the way. I’ve only made a dent in reading through the text but I’m sure this will be a useful volume for those doing research on black music.

The third book is much shorter though, at nearly 500 pages, it’s still not a “quickie”. *Wall Street Journal* culture reviewer Terry Teachout has followed his 2009 bio of Louis Armstrong – *Pops* – with the bio of another jazz legend. *Duke: The Life of Duke Ellington* (Gotham Books). Using unpublished interviews and other primary sources, Teachout attempts to provide info that has not been covered in the many other Ellington bios. The basic text of the work fills only the first 361 pages; the remaining one-third of the book is filled with *Source Notes* for each chapter (so you can see where Teachout got his info.). If you liked *Pops*, you’ll like this one too.

**One last “teaser”:** As my deadline approached, I just received another volume from producer Larry Black’s *Country’s Family Reunion* DVD series. *Simply Bluegrass* is going to be a must-have for early country/bluegrass collectors. A deeper review next time but – if in a rush – head to <http://tinyurl.com/mmy6mbe>

Well that’s it till next time. Unless noted, all items are available on Amazon.

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