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Anything Phonographic – (In The Groove magazine)

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This month's column may be a bit shorter on items reviewed but when you see the volume of entertainment value in the two featured items I promised you last month, you'll understand where I spent my listening and viewing time over the last month or two. So let's start out with the most unusual one.

A Landmark History of Popular Music (well, at least until 1975) – When I received the sample episode of a new 17-hour-long (!) five-DVD set from Music Video Distributors in April, it had photos of the Beatles on the cover, and even a Beatlesque title – *All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music*. Sure didn't sound like something that fits the scope of this column, I thought. Then I watched the first hour and was hooked. Here was an hour on Ragtime, another hour on Vaudeville and British Music Hall and one on early folk and country. In fact, it's not until Episode 10 that we even get to the late 1940s (and Episode 11 brings us back to Jimmie Rodgers Uncle Dave Macon and country music).

I don't think there has ever been a film or video project of this scope in documenting the "History of Popular Music". Director Tony Palmer literally traveled the world to film thousands of hours of performances and interviews with the "key players", who shed light on all aspects of the "popular music" business. These interviewees are singers, musicians, agents, critics, record producers and composers. And the quotes that Palmer – who seems to actually be doing the interviews in most cases are - gems. Producer John Hammond pulls no punches in discussing racism in the early recording industry. Hoagy Carmichael gives background on his hit "Stardust" and composer Irving Caesar tells some wonderful Tin Pan Alley stories. Luckily, Palmer conducted the rare interviews in the mid-1970s with Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee and Eubie Blake before they died. It's moments like these that make this essential viewing for anyone, of any age, who cares about "Popular Music".

It's also very important to know the background of the project. From 1976 to 1980 the 17 Episodes were broadcast on British commercial TV and were never aired completely in the US. "Popular Music" as covered in the 17 chapters of this set means any music that is not "Classical". Presented mostly chronologically in the order that these musical styles occurred. So, since Palmer's film stops at about 1978 we are missing the last 30 years of pop music history. No Disco, no Punk, no Alternative and no Disney on Broadway. Younger viewers will be surprised to see all the long hair, sideburns, leisure suits and wide shirt collars. But this was the period when the interviews were done. The series was recorded on film and, though the soundtrack has been remastered, the film stock was not restored. It looks dated. Palmer sometimes becomes quirky in his choices of visuals. The early "Vaudeville and Music Hall" Episode has some nice footage of Al Jolson and some

British Music Hall performers but it also has a topless stripper from circa 1975. In the episode on "Protest Songs" we hear a song while we watch some really violent footage of a Roller Derby! The authorities that Palmer enlisted to "write" the scripts are experts like Stephen Sondheim (show music), Paul Oliver (blues), Derek Taylor (the Beatles) and Ian Whitcomb and Rudi Blesh (Ragtime).

So, despite some missteps and a visual quality that looks like a 16mm print, it's the interviews and the live performance footage that Palmer captured (mixed with lots of newsreel and TV footage) that make this set special. Knowing of the few moments of nudity and violence which are included, I still feel that a copy of this belongs in every school and public library to act as a visual and aural history course on both American and British pop culture for at least the first 3/4 of the 20th century. Nothing like this project will ever be attempted again, so this is the best we can hope for. **HIGHLY** recommended! (At most music outlets or look for the discounted price on sites like Amazon.com)