

## CanCon threads among the gold

- a recordings review essay

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|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1001: Phonography pioneers       | 1010: Gems of Broadway         |
| 1002: Ted Weems (1926-1931)      | 1011: Vintage Christmas        |
| 1003: Vintage George Gershwin    | 1012: Railroad songs & ballads |
| 1004: Hit-of-the-week            | 1013: Radioriginals            |
| 1005: Electric Edisons (1927-29) | 1014: Yanks in Montreal        |
| 1006: Vintage Jerome Kern        | 1015: Rudy Vallee              |
| 1007: Sex, drugs & booze         | 1016: Potted palm music        |
| 1008: Annette Hanshaw            | SP-1: Vintage potpourri no.1   |
| 1009: Piano favo(u)rites         | SP-2: Vintage gay songs        |

Vintage Recording Co., P.O. Box 356, St. Johnsbury, VT 05819 USA. US\$3.50 /cassette.

Really, friends, that title is no slur on Canadian music; the Canadian content ("CanCon") which appears, fleetingly on some tapes, in more concentrated doses on others, is every bit as fine as the music and performances by Americans and other non-Canadians chosen for reissue in this series. The music of every nationality has portions of silver and dross among its gold. Here a bit of all is transferred from originals dating from the turn of the century to the end of the 1930s and reissued on these cassettes, with an eye to the nostalgia market. The popular and dance music, operetta and musical comedy, jazz and other non-classical or "semi-classical" repertoires of those decades have proven much more durable than the musical puritans and snobs of those times would have guessed possible. Even much of the music which has slipped into oblivion retains considerable charm. The cassettes that Martin Bryan, who runs the Vintage Recording Co. alone, has compiled, reflect the famous and obscure, the good and the mediocre. Even those of lesser interest have appeal for the music researcher or sociologist; most of them thus make suitable acquisitions for both academic and public library collections, although not always for the same reasons.

Two of the tapes devote their mylar to composers known chiefly for their stage music. Release 1006 was timed to commemorate the centennial of Jerome Kern's birth in 1885, reissuing songs in a variety of moods that may surprise listeners who think of this composer as a specialist in "ballads", i.e. slow, lyrical, and heartfelt melodies. There are some very lively numbers

on this tape, and one, "O! Bill Baker" (the undertaker), should tickle the fancy of those who appreciate "sick" humour. The CanCon consists of a performance by the orchestra of Joseph C. Smith, a Montréal dance band leader, of two selections in medley from "The girl from Utah", plus another medley (in Victor's "Gems" series) from "Oh boy!" as sung by the Victor Light Opera Company, a studio group of which Canadian tenor Harry Macdonough was a member (at least for many of their recordings, which do not label-list the personnel). The Gershwin tape, release 1003, quite aside from its CanCon quotient, is one of the best in the series, containing many lesser known, but wonderful and fascinating songs. It is pleasing to hear the introductions, too, of many well known songs now usually performed shorn of those measures. George Culley in 1924 was a member of the trumpet section in Waring's Pennsylvanians, heard playing "Nashville Nightingale", and his fellow Canadian, Macdonough (who, like Henry Burr, was one very prolific recording artist) presumably sings as part of the Victor Light Opera Company in "Song of the flame".

Three of these cassettes are devoted to individual performers. I liked release 1008 so much that I included it among my choice for the five best recordings of the year in Fanfare's annual "Want list" of Nov/Dec 1986. Annette Hanshaw was one of the great stars of the era, whose recordings are sought avidly by collectors of 78 rpm "personality discs". 1008 includes the most endearingly vivacious rendering of "Ain't he sweet?" that these ears have ever heard, and

some excellent CanCon in the person of dance band leader Will Osborne, directing "Say it isn't so"; his group is the most famous of those, Canadian or otherwise, heard here with Hanshaw. Rudy Vallee, to whom release 1015 devotes itself, was a star in several entertainment media. Neither his cassette nor 1002, the one featuring Ted Weems, through whose dance band many celebrated soloists and future leaders of their own aggregations passed, include any CanCon.

Five releases focus on companies and their production traits; four of these are devoted to individual labels. The other one, release 1013, "Radioriginals" samples some of those transcription discs of radio programs recorded mainly for the use of small independent stations that could not usually benefit from the live shows broadcast by the network stations. The discs of the kind heard on "Radioriginals" could be aired whenever the station chose, although programs like "Brunswick brevities" were produced in series suitable for use at regular intervals. There is no CanCon here. Release 1001, "Phonograph pioneers" comprises 22 selections, all but three of which are Victor recordings. For the most part it features the prolific studio musicians, primarily vocalists, whose recording careers were more important than their stage or concert activities. The buyer gets yet another chance to hear Harry Macdonough among the CanCon artists, as a soloist this time (in "Ain't you coming back to old New Hampshire, Molly?") as well as the even more omnipresent Henry Burr, as the CanCon partner in duets ("I'm starving for one sight of you" and "My prairie song bird") and in male vocal foursome form as part of the Peerless Quartet ("Sweetness"). For a little songwriting CanCon, listen to "I remember you", co-written by Canadian lyricist Alfred Bryan. The recordings drawn on for this tape all date from before World War I, a time when hokum, cornball or sentimental, reigned supreme. The value is historical rather than musical, with the relief of some period charm and a brilliant moment or two, such as Vess L. Ossman, a celebrated banjo virtuoso, playing the "Maple leaf rag".

Release 1005 turns to the Edison company's last bid to survive in the record market, selecting 17 of Edison's rare electrical recordings from 1927-29, before Edison abandoned the business. Rarity is all that most of these recordings have to recommend them; if Edison records had all become this drearily mediocre by the late 1920s,

it is no surprise that they failed. For the scholar, however, hearing such performers as B.A. Rolfe and his orchestra, puts into context the work of dance bands whose fame lasted. Vaughan de Leath and a few other performers did have major careers, so a residue of musical interest exists; the purely discographical appeal is, admittedly, predominant. CanCon here is limited to the subject matter of the song "Hello Montreal", a lively Prohibition era tribute to the freedom to guzzle hooch north of the U.S. border, performed with a strong jazz flavour by Arthur Fields and His Assassimators. Release 1010 is a sampler of the Victor Talking Machine Co.'s extensive series of medleys from musical shows, entitled "Gems of..." The Victor Light Opera Company sang these medleys, so performance CanCon in the person of that work-horse, Harry Macdonough, abounds on this tape. By contrast, release 1004 contains no CanCon. "Hit of the week" was the Durium Co.'s line of fibre-based flexidiscs, cheaply made and cheaply sold in the depths of the Great Depression, mass-marketed through news stands. They relied upon respectably well known but rather ordinary performers, plus such celebrities as Ben Pollack, Scrappy Lambert, and Sam Lanin (included on the tape). The prevailing bounce and musical charm makes this cassette a pleasant enough listening experience to relieve a bout of personal depression.

Tapes in the last major grouping feature topic, instrument, and style. For many, the titles tell much of what the librarian needs to know in selecting them. Release 1014, "Yanks in Montreal" has obvious appeal for Canadians. It presents a selection of recordings made in the studios of the Berliner Gramophone Co., the American Victor Talking Machine Co.'s Canadian affiliate. Berliner lured some of Victor's prominent artists, Americans, or Canadians then active more in the U.S., to record specifically for the Canadian market: the recordings were not sold in the U.S. Much of the music is in syncopated, rag-influenced dance rhythms, very enjoyable to hear. Henry Burr reappears, not surprisingly, as soloist ("Watch, hope and wait, little girl"), duettist ("They're all sweeties") and member of the Peerless Quartet (a medley of "The bells of St. Mary's", "Oh! what a pal was Mary", and "My baby's arms").

Since the appeal of the remainder of these tapes, apart from much good music, is so straightforwardly topical, it should suffice simply to list them that way, with their CanCon noted:

Sex, drugs & booze (1007): "Hello Montreal!"; a different recording, this one led and sung by Ted Lewis, than the one on 1014; performer Beatrice Lillie ("He was a gentleman")

Vintage gay songs (SP-2): Performers Guy Lombardo and some of his Royal Canadians born in Canada ("Pu-leeze! Mister Hemingway!")

Railroad songs & ballads (1012): No CanCon.

Vintage Christmas (1011): Performers Miro's Band (members Canadian, but led by American director Walter B. Rogers rather than usual Canadian leader Henri Miro, for the recording included)("Christmas eve: Kiddies' patrol"); Iwan d'Archambeau ('cellist of Flonzalay Quartet)("The first nowell"); there is a possibility that Harry Macdonough sings as a member of the small Victor Oratorio Chorus ("While shepherds watched their flocks").

Piano favo(u)rites (1009): Performer Willy Eckstein ("Where the shy little violets grow").

"Potted palm" music (1016): Joint songwriters

Eugene Lockhart and Ernest Seitz ("The world is waiting for the sunrise"); noteworthy are the lovely introduction and, near the end, an attractive counter-melody. This cassette, unlike the others is not an anthology: all the performances are by the Victor Salon Orchestra, under Nathaniel Shilkret's direction.

Vintage potpourri no.1 (SP-1): Performers Guy Lombardo (leader) and Carmen Lombardo (vocalist) and some of the Royal Canadians born in Canada ("My old flame").

That's it! The tapes are all in mono of course; the quality of sound is about as good as the original discs will permit, which is to say that Mr. Bryan's job of transferring 78s to tape is skillful. As a parting suggestion, the reader should consider Martin Bryan's Additions and corrections to Edward B. Moogk's "Roll back the years", v.1: a contribution to understanding early recorded sound in Canada. This modest 1986 supplement can be ordered, for US\$1.25, postage included, from the same address as the cassettes.

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## CAML/ACBM 1987 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

### MEMBERS' PROJECTS SESSION

Peter Higham reported on concert preparations he was able to undertake during a 2-month study leave in 1986. After the formation of the Webern Trio, by two faculty members of the School of Music at Memorial University, Carolyn Hart, soprano, and Paul Bendzsa, clarinet, with Higham, guitar, painstaking work on Anton Webern's Drei Lieder op.18 helped solidify the ensemble. To expand the repertoire, they decided to commission a work from a Newfoundland composer, Michael Parker, with funding from the Canada Council.

Peter's work included transcribing a Sonatina by Castelnuovo-Tedesco, preparing the guitar part for the Webern work, and communicating with Parker about the guitar part of the new composition. The Grey Islands, op.33 ended up being a major work of thirty minutes duration, including spoken prose sections from the text by John Steffler, as well as the sung poetic sections.

The Grey Islands was premiered in Corner Brook in September 1986, and recorded by the CBC. The concert, the Trio's contribution to the