Book Reviews


_Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy_ represents the first detailed account of Gennett Records, a small Richmond, Indiana, recording company that made monumental contributions to music history. It was a company that sold millions of records in the early 1920s; a company whose catalogue included such widely diverse items as marimba bands, Hawaiian bands, symphony orchestras, comedy recordings, political speeches (including those of the Ku Klux Klan), and specialty discs; a company that was singular in catering to both the segregated white and black record markets; a company whose growth paralleled that of the emerging phenomena of jazz, rural blues, and country music—new genres on the fringe of the music mainstream.

This book is, however, much more than just a history of Gennett Records. It is, among other things, an accounting of the beginnings of the American recording industry, exploring such events as Thomas Edison’s invention of the cylinder phonograph in 1877, Emil Berliner’s development of the gramophone, and the intriguing and often rancorous legal battles among early recording giants Victor, Columbia, and Edison which resulted in the declaration that the recording techniques controlled by Victor were public domain. It is also a fascinating picture of a period when smaller phonograph and record companies were generally divisions of manufacturers of furniture products, and the merchandising of records was conducted by such businesses as Sears, Roebuck & Company and the Kresge variety chain.

For the jazz buff this book provides an interesting and insightful look at the recordings of some of jazz’s seminal figures and chronicles the debut recordings of such giants as the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK), King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band with Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines with Lois Deppe’s Orchestra, and Bix Beiderbecke and His Wolverine Orchestra. Its well-written and informative chapters include “The Origins of Jazz Recording,” “The New Orleans Rhythm Kings,” “King Oliver and His Legendary Creole Jazz Band,” “The Music of Jelly Roll Morton,” “Bix and the Wolverines,” “Hoagy and Bix: Soulmates in Jazz,” “Louis Armstrong and the Red Onion Jazz Babies,” “Just Passing Through,” “Other Jazz Debuts in Richmond, 1923–25,” and a riveting chapter, “Jazz Hysteria in the Hoosier State,” that is particularly relevant to readers with a special interest in Indiana history.
King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, 1923
From left: Baby Dodds, Honore Dutrey, Joe "King" Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Bill Johnson, Johnny Dodds, Lillian Hardin Armstrong

Curtis Hitch's Happy Harmonists Recording Hoagy Carmichael's "Washboard Blues," Richmond, Indiana, 1925
From left: Haskell Simpson, Maurice May, Harry Wright, Earl "Buddy" McDowell, Arnold Habbe, Hoagy Carmichael, Curtis Hitch, Fred Rollinson

Duncan P. Schmidt Collection.
A wonderful surprise to this reviewer was the chapter, “Rural Recordings in the Electronic Era,” that documents Gennett’s recording activity in the genres of country music, rural blues, and piano blues (boogie woogie). Of country music the author writes: “Collectively, the thousands of titles issued on Gennett and its affiliated budget labels contributed substantially to the massive body of old time records issued by a handful of record companies in the late 1920s and early 1930s . . . [that] form the bedrock of today’s country music record industry” (pp. 151-52). This chapter also covers some of the world’s greatest blues singers who recorded at the Gennett Studios, including Jesse Crump, Thomas A. Dorsey, Big Bill Broonzy, Sam Collins, Scrapper Blackwell, Leroy Carr, and Roosevelt Sykes. Prophetically, blues great Charlie Patton recorded his first album there (6-14-29) and blues giant Blind Lemon Jefferson his last album (8-24-29).

*Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy* is brilliantly written and highly recommended.

David N. Baker is distinguished professor of music and chairman of the Jazz Department, Indiana University School of Music, Bloomington.


Photographic collections are often problematic for historians. While the images are often attractive, they may be orphans with little or no documentation of the subject matter. Published collections of unidentified photographs function only as nostalgia or as generalized portraits of life “way back when.” The more information the editor of a book of photographs can provide the more valuable the images become to the historian without losing any appeal to readers with less rigorous demands.

Cecil K. Byrd has assembled a fine collection of photographs of life in southern Indiana during the first half of the twentieth century. To produce this book Byrd worked for over a year with the seventeen-thousand-plus photographs and negatives in the Hohenberger Manuscripts housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University. He edited the final selection of photographs down to 124. Then, using Frank M. Hohenberger’s notes and the identification information filed with the photographs, he “went everywhere there was a photograph” that would be used in the book and gathered more material for the captions. These captions give the photographs a historical value that rivals their charm and nostalgic appeal. Byrd has enriched the viewers’ enjoyment of these photographs by placing them in the context of time and place.

Frank M. Hohenberger was an excellent photographer with an apparent love of rural life and an eye for detail. His photographs