

Highlights of the 26th Annual Canadian Collectors' Congress

By Gérald Parker

Presentations on Gershwin, playback of 78-rpm recordings, and the phonograph record as a cultural medium were among the highlights of this year's 26th Annual Canadian Collectors's Congress, held in Toronto on April 25-27. Sixty-three people attended, including members of the Montréal Vintage Music Society, the West Mississauga Jazz Muddies, and other researchers and collectors who share a passion for jazz, swing, ragtime, blues, Gospel, and allied "hot" musical styles.

George Gershwin

Ross Wilby's talk, entitled "A Glimpse of Gershwin," was an encompassing glance at the protean composer and pianist. For Wilby, as for most jazz-oriented collectors, Gershwin is thought of primarily as a fount of melody, mostly of show tunes that form such a stellar part of the repertory upon which jazz arrangers and musicians base their arrangements and improvisations.

Many also know Gershwin's piano roll recordings of brilliant "novelty piano" (ragtime-descended) renderings of his and other composers' show and pop tunes. But these, along with the gramophone recordings of the Rhapsody in Blue (one acoustical, the other electrical) do not begin to reveal the variety of his playing. The rather glitzy records of Gershwin's songs during his own time and the years immediately following his death give a one-sided view of their latent potential.

Early "hot" dance recordings of Gershwin's songs and jazz interpretations recorded prior to 1930 give a good idea of his stylings, even

if some of these groups are "society" dance orchestras in which Gershwin's participation is more imaginative than that of the musicians surrounding him.

Such recordings, however, are few in number. For that matter, there are only 24 sides of 78-rpm recordings of Gershwin's playing. While there are 140 roll recordings of Gershwin at the piano, that rather inflexible and rigid recording medium gives a limited portrait in sound of Gershwin's style and articulation. The rolls, therefore, should supplement the other recordings in coming to an assessment of Gershwin's playing. The film recordings also go a long way to adding dimension to his musical profile.

Wilby selected some of the show tunes to illustrate Gershwin's style, but balanced them with lesser-known music to reveal byways of the master's output. These included recordings of Gershwin's music by performers associated with its introduction to the public, with or without Gershwin among the session artists.

The picture of Gershwin that emerges from the recordings is elusive, but those at the conference might at least have a less reductionist image of the American composer after having their ears "stretched" by Wilby's presentation.

Playback of 78's

Randy Stehle spoke about "Optimization of Playback of 78's: Getting the Best out Those Jazz Records." It was a practical presentation geared to obtaining good sound in playback

of 78's in the home. The problems that collectors encounter have a lot to do with the sound inherent in the discs themselves as well as incompatibilities with modern playback equipment.

The major difficulty arises from the divergence of recording curves, stereo or mono amplifiers being geared to the R.I.A.A. curve, while most electrical 78's were recorded on the N.A.B. curve. N.A.B. discs are at least playable on a turntable with 78-rpm capability (that has, hopefully, variable speed adjustment) linked to an amplifier geared to playback at the R.I.A.A. equalization curve. However, the sound that emerges from the grooves is not what was put there in the recording process. It frequently suffers from harshness, weak or excessive response at various parts of the frequency curve, and other factors that enervate the sound quality, added to distortion and surface noise, which the R.I.A.A. curve exaggerates.

Stehle explained how to use equalizers to approximate the recording curve at which the discs were waxed. He also pointed out the diversity of standards within the same time frame from label to label and within the production of individual labels.

He stressed what he regards as the cardinal rule in using equalization and other equipment: compensate first for characteristics of the individual 78-rpm record before applying devices like noise reduction, filtering, and so forth. The special needs for good playback of vertically tracking (hill-'n'-dale) records were also mentioned, e.g., Edison Diamond Discs, Pathé, and Associated Transcription discs.

Stylus size at the point of groove contact is also very significant in reducing both unwanted noise and to avoid wear on the grooves. The 78's require different styli since

both groove width and depth varied over the years and from label to label.

Phonograph as Cultural Medium

The nominal topic of William Howland Kenney's presentation was "Chicago Jazz and the Record Industry, 1919-1945." But the Kent State University professor spoke more about the phonograph as a cultural medium, surrogate for live music, preserver of musical performance, diffusion medium over a wide variety of musical cultures, and many other topics of interest.

Kenney has broader sympathies and greater tolerance than such writers as Allen Bloom and other proponents of high culture who agonize over the transformations in popular culture that are occurring with ever greater rapidity, and having among their impact the fragmentation of musical tastes (even within the same family). Kenney pointed out that similar stress-lines existed in popular culture in the past, even if the results were less shattering of social cohesiveness.

He addressed the "high priests," such as the German musical sociologist Theodor Adorno, who are contemptuous not only of popular "commercial" music but even of an art form as highly developed and sophisticated as jazz. There is a terrible lack of vision among these thinkers, who conceal mere snobbery and personal preference in sophistries. There is a tendency of the phonograph record to encourage isolation, solitude and even alienation among listeners, especially rebellious younger ones "alone with their records." However, making one's personal, even if somewhat solipsistic, universe can be a release valve of benefit to society.

As for commercialism, Kenney attacked the notion that record companies program and predetermine public taste. They never had

the means of such social engineering at their disposal. Changes in musical taste and style have had an uncanny way of emerging from below rather than of being imposed from on high. Companies usually had to latch on to developing trends if they wished to avoid losing business and falling into oblivion. The content of Kenney's talk was such that it would probably take his projected next book to convey all of the wisdom! It was a glorious conclusion, indeed, and a most unusual one, for the conference.

Other presentations of interest included Ron Anger's talk on the first Canadian "trad jazz" concert in Toronto on Dec. 2, 1948 (which was recorded by a professional sound

studio), the National Library of Canada's recently completed project to computerize the Compo Company Ltd. recording ledgers (with masterly editing by Jack Litchfield, that hopefully will be available on the NLC's web site in the near future), and Mark Miller's biography of the unrecorded Vancouver drummer and band leader, George Paris. Miller's findings will appear in his forthcoming book on Canadian jazz.

Audio or video cassettes of any session are available from Eugene Miller (not to be confused with Mark Miller!), 90 Prince George Drive, Etobicoke (Toronto), Ontario, M9B 2X8. Tel: (416) 231-4055, Fax: (416) 239-6284.

