A few days after submitting this column I’ll be heading off to Bloomington, IN for the 50th Annual ARSC (Assn. for Recorded Sound Collections) Conference, where I’m sure I’ll see some of you. It’s a great mix of private collectors like us and the professional archivists who are preserving our recorded sound heritage. If you want to hear complete ARSC Conference presentations from earlier years, you can do so – for free – at www.arsc-audio.org. Now on to the “discoveries” for this month – a nice variety of things you may not know about.

**Sissle & Blake make it to Broadway AND to CD** - You may have seen publicity for a “new” Broadway version of the 1921 landmark musical *Shuffle Along*, which had a script by Miller & Lyles and a score by pioneer recording artists Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. Broadway director George C. Wolfe has adapted the show and given it a new (and lengthy) title: *Shuffle Along, or, the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed*. I do hope to get into New York to provide a review here in my next column. In the meantime, there is really big news with the release of a new CD from Harbinger Records titled *Sissle and Blake sing Shuffle Along* (available from Amazon). This is a project I’ve shepherded for almost 20 years since fellow collector Peter Shambarger discovered the acetate 78rpm of the “backers disc” for the planned revival, *Shuffle Along of 1950*, where Sissle narrates the plot and sings the songs while Blake accompanies him. The show was never mounted but a different version did hit Broadway in 1952 and lasted but four performances. Shambarger gave the rights to Ken Bloom of Harbinger who had superb transfers made by go-to sound engineer Doug Pomeroy, and eight of the songs are included on the new CD. (None of Sissle’s commentary was included but plans are to release the full “backers’ disc” in the fall.) None of these eight tracks have ever been heard except for Shambarger, Pomeroy, Bloom or myself. – until now! The rest of the CD is filled with 13 recordings, and one “uncredited piano roll” by cast members of the 1921 show. None of these recordings have been on CD before. As with other Harbinger Productions, there is a 24-page booklet with two detailed essays and rare photos which add a lot to the enjoyment. The Broadway production is to have an Original Cast album to be
released on the Nonesuch label, but Harbinger is giving the world the “real thing”.

**The last third of “The Big Bang in Country Music”** – Nearly everyone who collects vintage music on 78s – even those who don’t collect country or hillbilly records – knows about the infamous 1927 recording sessions in Bristol, TN, where RCA recording scout (and later music publisher) Ralph Peer, recorded the first commercial sessions of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. In 2011 the Germany-based reissue label Bear Family Records, issued a deluxe five CD (plus book) set of the recordings. I was familiar with these Victor records but I wasn’t aware that – during the same period – Columbia was making similar recordings (which BFR released two years ago, and which I hope to review in my next column). Even more interesting, to me at least, was that the smaller Brunswick Records label was doing recording sessions in another Eastern Tennessee city – Knoxville – at the St. James Hotel, home of Radio Station WNOX. Though the label had recorded George Reneau in their New York studios as early as 1924, it was two sessions (in 1929 and 1930) recorded by Producer Richard Voynow and audio engineer Bill Brown, that captured many local musicians (and a few that traveled long distances) in their own backyard. In May Bear Family released *Knox County Stomp: Knoxville Sessions 1929-1930*, produced, and thoroughly annotated by Ted Olson and Tony Russell (who were responsible for the previous two collections). Unlike the Victor sessions, many of which appear on multiple collections, virtually none of the artists included here will be familiar to you. But, boy did they make great music and their releases (all on Brunswick’s Vocalion label) are not only hard to find, but in a few cases, only one copy is known to exist. The four CDs contain 99 recordings from private collections - nearly all in excellent condition - by black and white performers and bands. There’s even a spoken word record by Col, J.G. Sterchi, who owned the furniture store which sold phonographs and records and that housed both the St. James and the radio station. Half the reason to acquire this set – if you collect this kind of music – is the 12x12-inch 150-page hardbound book which Olsen and Russell wrote. Using the full recording ledgers of the two sessions, they provide details on, not only the artists whose records were issued, but those who – for one reason or another – were never released. There is a wealth of information here as well as great graphics and some wonderful performances of country, gospel, old-timey string band music and topical songs.

**Another discovery from the Bristol Sessions gets a deluxe package from Dust-to-Digital** – The latest release from the Atlanta-based Dust-to-Digital label is *Blind Alfred Reed: Appalachian Visionary*. In this collection, all of Reed’s songs, both faith-based and secular, recorded for the Victor Talking Machine Company over two sessions in 1927 in Bristol TN and Camden, NJ and two sessions in 1929 in New York City, are on one 22 track CD, complemented by well researched essays by Producer Ted Olson and LOTS of archival photos. All packed in a small 5x7-inch hardbound book. Reed played fiddle and sang and, on some sessions, he was accompanied on guitar by his son Orville. (The Victor Company, however, misspelled Orville’s first name as “Arville”!). To fill out the CD to the max, Olson has included the younger Reed’s solo recordings. Reed (the elder) wrote many songs about “events” but he also wrote humorous songs like “Woman’s Been After Man Ever Since” and “Why Do You Bob Your Hair Girls?” (which was so popular that it birthed a sequel – both are here of course.). My big discovery – and one of my favorite tracks – is the gospel number “I’m Gonna Walk in The Streets of Glory” by the West Virginia Night Owls, which has Orville on vocal and guitar and Fred Pendleton on vocals and fiddle. Another classy production from D-T-D.

**New for your bookshelf (after reading them of course!)** - Three books that arrived over the last few months will appeal to my readers. Arcadia Press, which specialized in local history books (many of which I’ve covered in my column), has a new imprint – The History
Press – and in their catalog I found a book first published in 2013, which I never knew existed. If you have a collection of early Victor comedy 78s, you undoubtedly own a few discs by Charles Ross Taggart., best known as “The Old Country Fiddler”. Well, it turns out that author Adam R. Boyce, whose family has lived in Vermont since the 1760s, has made a career of performing a one-man show imitating Taggart (Boyce plays the fiddle and has composed over 100 fiddle tunes). In the 158-page paperback book, The Man From Vermont: Charles Ross Taggart, The Old Country Fiddler, Boyce not only tells the reader about Taggart’s life, but includes the text of many of his monologues and personal letters, and supplements them with black-and-white graphics from historical societies. There is an index but no Discography. I learned a lot about the man – and so will you. This was a joy to discover. (www.historypress.net). Another “regional” recording artist, gets similar treatment for this same publisher with Louis Jordan: Son of Arkansas, Father of R&B, a 160-page book (from 2014) in which author Stephen Koch, an Arkansas native, musician, and NPR broadcaster, details Jordan’s recording and film career. (Again, there is no Discography or Filmography). I did find it irritating that the author defends his use of spelling Jordan’s first name as “Louie” – by saying he has spelled it the way the musician would say it phonetically.

Edwin M. Bradley has penned two previous books on the first Hollywood musicals and sound shorts. His latest – Unsung Hollywood Musicals of the Golden Era (McFarland) is subtitled: 50 Overlooked Films and Their Stars 1929-1939. The author divides the 226-page paperback into chapters which reveal recently discovered rarities, big films with bigger casts (International House with Rudy Vallee, Gracie Allen, Cab Calloway, Baby Rose Marie and Bela Lugosi -to name just a few! – is a prime example), and films in which dramatic stars sang. For each film, Bradley lists all the songs as well as the 78-rpm recordings which came from the soundtrack or were performed by the cast member. About one-third of the 50 films is available on home video and that info is here also. I’ve already created a “to seek out” list of those titles. It’s such a shame that about 30 films are not available for the public to have access to.

Phono – GRAPHIC- ally Speaking - I received some nice compliments from readers in response to the story in my last column about the revival of the Victrola label by a musician near Camden. Well, now I’ve discovered a Seattle, WA (home to the coffee conglomerate Starbucks) coffee roaster whose product – and even their coffee mug – salutes our hobby. Victrola Coffee Roasters (www.victrolacoffee.com) is a great name – and really good small batch roasted coffee – but they obviously didn’t realize that the “-ola” that Victor put on their product referred to the horn being inside the case, and their logo shows a horn gramophone. (Check out their website). While looking through new releases from the budget-DVD producer Alpha Home Video, I discovered the DVD release of a 1925 silent film titled His Master’s Voice, starring- not Nipper – but Thunder “The Marvel Dog”. (An article on a major exhibit of antique games, revealed a Dutch game – The Game of Invention - produced in 1894 that, literally, centered around Thomas Edison. And finally, there is something called La Victrola Project, which – if funded – will be a multi-media art installation at the annual Burning Man music and art festival held in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert in September. It will consist of a 35-foot “Victrola” (actually an outside horn gramophone) which will move and play music. La Victrola is named partially in homage to La
Contessa, a giant Spanish Galleon that used to appear at Burning Man in the early 2000s. It's really hard for me to describe it but go to their website and see for yourself. http://www.lavictrola2016.com; but see a sample graphic here.

Much ado about a recording artist you (probably) won’t want to hear – We all seem to own one (or two) records that we play for friends as a novelty. It could be “The Okeh Laughing Record” or one of what I refer to as the “gas” records. And then there is the “novelty” of Ms. Florence Foster Jenkins, who – long before Johnny Carson discovered “Mrs. Miller” – was giving concerts and making records, by singing WAY off-key. Earlier this year a major motion picture – Marguerite – based on FFJ’s persona was released. Coming this summer, the esteemed actress Meryl Streep (who did her own singing in both Mama Mia and Into the Woods) will be starring in the film titled Florence Foster Jenkins. Marguerite is on DVD, though I haven’t seen it, but I’m looking forward to seeing (if not necessarily hearing) Streep’s performance. You can find the two minute “making of” featurette at http://tinyurl.com/jyuvbmb. If you want the true story of FFJ you can find a 90-minute documentary here: http://tinyurl.com/gkqqxu7

Odds ands Ends – I’d like to put in another recommendation for ordering the MP3 CDs of past record auctions from Nauck’s Vintage Records. I continue to, not only be entertained by recordings – of all types – that I’d never have a chance to hear otherwise (we are talking $1,000 78s in some cases), but the CDs include two or three “bonus hours” (making as many as 10 hours’ worth!) that you wouldn’t hear on the semi-annual radio show. All for 20 bucks! I only wish there was an index of titles on past shows (Kurt Nauck says he’s working on that) but these are great for long trips as well as creating an archive of truly RARE records.(www.78rpm.com) I’ve been discussing the four-hour PBS documentary American Epic for almost a year now. A shortened version is still making the rounds of film festivals. I hoped be able to preview the series for you (it should now air on PBS in the Fall) but the screeners are- I’m told – being re-edited. So hopefully by September I’ll have more news for you.

Well, there you have it. I hope this will keep you busy over the summer.

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