

## MORE BRITISH NOSTALGIA

### HANDS ACROSS THE SEA

SPRINGTIME IN YOUR HEART-Jessie Matthews, World Records SH 425; THE MORE WE ARE TOGETHER-Jay Whidden and His Midnight Follies Band, 1926-1927, World Records SH 426; OVER THERE-12 Original Recordings from World War I (1914-1919), Eastside Record Corporation.

The British seem to have a way with reissues of popular material from an earlier age. It can't just be the talent they seem to have recorded in the 1920s and 1930s; American performers were just as good doing the same sort of songs. Perhaps it's the quality of the recordings they produce which makes the difference. Both of these EMI re-releases sound as though great care was taken to make the listener feel terrifically at home with the sounds coming from the speakers. I don't honestly believe that comfortability is essential with material, but I do think that a listener, coming for the first time to a new singer, an unfamiliar orchestra or very special material, should be made to feel that here is something to delight, to be enjoyed. Both of these discs do just that.

Jessie Matthews never had the best voice in the world. Her career, though a long one spanning the years 1919-1980, was particularly Britain-oriented despite several assaults on American audiences in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. She was a joy to watch as she danced her way through the best British musical films produced in the 1930s: It's Love Again, Head Over Heels, Gangway, First a Girl and especially Evergreen with its score, partially written by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, are marvelous. Jessie dances, pouts and sings like a slender Ginger Rogers; she acts like a peevish, juvenile Katherine Hepburn and she smiles and makes love with the biggest, most expressive eyes this side of Louise Rainer. There's only one problem for the American sensibility--she is so British. For someone like me who enjoys all things English, there's no problem, but it is a turn-off for many Americans.

On this new album, Jessie is heard in selections recorded between 1926 and 1966. What strikes the uninitiated listener first, I think, is how little her voice altered in the intervening forty years. The clarity and the slightly "shrill British Soprano" described by Anna Russell remains unchanged for the most part.

The songs she sings here are basically those she helped make famous. Noel Gay's Journey's End opens the album and it is a fitting place to begin. Recorded in 1926, it represents the young Jessie at her best. Side one continues with many unexpected gems, songs I'd not heard before which proved to be as delightful as the singer, most especially "Hold My Hand" sung with Sonnie Hale (their affair ended disastrously for both of their marriages and their careers), Noel Gay's "One Little Kiss From You" and "Three Wishes" by George Posford, recorded in 1933.

Side two brings us some Jessie Matthews classics--Rodgers & Hart's "Dancing on the Ceiling", Jerome Kern & Buddy De Sylva's "Look For the Silver Lining" and "Whip-Poor-Will", Rodgers & Hammerstein's "Hello, Young Lovers" recorded in 1966 and a song from the British Musical hit in which she replaced her old friend Anna Neagle, "I Was Young". This song makes a touching next-to-closing on this bill of 16 songs. Jessie sounds older, but still spirited. She seems to be genuinely enjoying herself...all of her recordings sound that way and perhaps that's the key. She has a good time, so we do too.

The mid-to-late twenties are, musically, an era rich in pop hits. The performers of the day, American and British, had a world of riches from which to choose. The greatest songwriters of the century, composers and lyricists who could bridge the gaps between theatre writing and pop markets (and later film as well) were displaying their prolific wares: Walter Donaldson, Gus Kahn, Con Conrad, Al Jolson, Billy Rose, Richard Whiting, Irving King and a man named Horatio Nicholls were all busy in the 1926-1927 period when American bandleader/violinist/vocalist, Jay Whidden, was making the records brought together on this fine reissue album.

Whidden had been Con Conrad's partner in a two-piano act which brought the two men to London in 1912. The craze for "hot-Jazz" bands in London brought many young American musicians into prominence and Jay Whidden was among them. He had an ear for the unusual song and the spicy arrangement and his band was quite a popular one. Two of this album's reissues were recorded in London's Wigmore Hall, according to the notes by Brian Rust, and they are the only ones my machine had difficulty tracking. As they close side one and open side two I'm not sure what, if anything, that means.

The afore-mentioned songwriter Horatio Nicholls contributed the song "Shepherd of the Hills", one of Jay Whidden's biggest hits of the period. His vocal is wonderfully idiomatic, very little expression in the voice, rapid-fire delivery, sacrificing the lyric to the pace of the arrangement. It works and what more do you need.

Whidden introduces "Since Tommy Atkins Taught the Chinese How to Charleston" with a quip which gives us a short, but honest insight into his personal style and sense of humor. The song which follows is very much of its period, more so than many others on this album. Other interesting items on this disc are "Hello, Baby" (remember Ruth Etting's wonderful rendition when you listen to this one), "You've Got Those Wanna-Go-Back-Again Blues", "Too Many Tots Make You Totter" and "At Sundown" which I think is better than Paul Whiteman's recording, but, being without a vocal, cannot dim the splendor of the close vocal harmony of the Duncan Sisters' recording.

For dance-band fans, lovers of the period or esoterica collectors, this is a fine album, full surprises, delights and joys.

Over There is a collection of American World War I songs and recordings. Unlike so many native reissues, very little has been done to clean up the sound of the originals, no stretching of the acoustic monaural sound has been done to "enhance" the album, no tricks have been played with the material. The recordings aren't always the ones you expect either. For example, the album's title song is neither the George M. Cohan waxing, nor is it the Caruso version. Instead we have the American Quartet recording of June 28, 1917. Unfortunately, unlike the reissued sides on the other two albums reviewed in this group, the above notes are all that are given on this album. Nowhere are the original companies cited. This gripe aside, the album is fun. It contains vocals by the Shannon Four, the Peerless Quartet, the tenor John McCormack and a healthy instrumental medley by the Victor Military Band. The songs include "Good Bye Broadway", "Hello, France", "Bring Back the Kaiser to Me", "We're Going Over", "The Boys Who Won't Come Home" and other more often heard pieces from the period.

The album is available in very few stores, but can be bought directly from the company at P.O. Box 4022, Grand Central Station, NY 10163.

Felix Mendelssohn's Hawaiian Serenaders: EVERGREENS-HAWAIIAN STYLE (World Records SH 394); Ronnie Ronalde - THE HAPPY WHISTLER (World Records (SH 395); FUNNY MAN (World Records SH 396).

I confess to being a fan of Jack Buchanan, Jessie Matthews, Cicely Courtneidge, Jack Hulbert, Lupino Lane, Noel Coward and Gertrude Lawrence. I openly admit a preference for these often under-rated British entertainers and this makes my time spent on the three albums reviewed in these pages even more delightful than usual. They're an odd lot, but how they do entertain.

Felix Mendelssohn's Hawaiian Serenaders were a revolutionary group. Formed in or about 1940 they brought the sounds of the Pacific, twanging steel guitars and that special quality of the vibraphone which seems to immediately conjure up visions of palm trees and semi-clad, brown skin maidens, to England. In the words of Brian Rust, Mendelssohn "had judged public taste very well; right up to his untimely death at the age of 41 (in 1952)..." The public responded to the sounds and especially to those evocative quick, hip-swinging rhythms when applied to favorite contemporary hits they already knew and loved.

This album presents 16 cuts recorded between August 1940 and December 1941 and the songs Mendelssohn "polynesianed" cover the gamut of 1925 Gershwin through 1933 Ellington. No one escapes the twanging guitars and no one is hurt by them either. "Tiger Rag", "The Sheik of Araby", "Crazy Rhythm" and "Solitude" are among my personal favorites on this album. The superb musicianship of Harry Brooker on the piano lines of "Solitude", in fact, transforms the song back to its mystical qualities which Gaby Rogers then echoes on the vibraphone while the rest of the Serenaders continue on their rhythmic, twangy way. The total effect is hauntingly beautiful.

"Tiger Rag" features Harry Brooker on electric Hawaiian guitar; he plays it on five other cuts as well. The sound is certainly a harbinger of things to come in the fifties and sixties as English pop music spread its influential wings.

This album is nostalgic, fun and thoroughly musical. It's for relaxing or dancing or anything else you may have in mind when steel guitars begin to throb beneath the Southern Cross. Try putting your feet up and sipping another coconut cocktail as the evening breeze wafts in from the sea...or the air conditioner.

I am not quite as fond of Ronnie Ronalde, but fans of whistling and yodeling may be happier. His singing voice, a pinched-up tenor, is not particularly interesting or even musical. He yodels very nicely and whistles along the same lines as his singing. His album opener presents him in all three capacities; "Mockin' Bird Hill" almost stopped me from going any further, but it did remind me, vaguely, of an old Erna Sack recording which had raised my eyebrows and piqued my interest, so I went on. The second song "I Miss My Swiss" added nothing to my first impression. Nor did the third or fourth song. When we got to his whistled version of Mendelssohn's "On Wings of Song" and I still wasn't having a good time, I knew I was in trouble. Arditi's "Il Bacio" almost changed my mind, but I remembered seeing "Clara Cluck" gobble and quack the song once and that was much more impressive; of course, I was much younger then.

If this is your cup of tea I suppose you'll have fun with the album, but as for me, I'll only play it to drive people out of the apartment after long parties which should have ended hours before.

Funny Man, on the other hand, is my kind of album. These original recordings of the 20's and 30's have been assembled for use in a Thames Television program about the life and experiences of British vaudevil- lian, Jimmy Jewel. The plot of the show follows carefully the history of Jewel and his family (called the Gibsons) with Jewel playing his own father. He has used some of his father's original sketches and comedy sequences for this 13-part series; I regret that none of them are in- cluded in this album. Instead we have those wonderful artists singing the songs they made hits on records as well as on the boards. Elsie Carlisle sings "I Love My Baby", and "So is Your Old Lady"; "Whispering" Jack Smith croons "Blue Skies" and "Miss Annabelle Lee"; Peggy Wood's Jerome Kern classics include "The Night Was Made for Love" and "Try to Forget"; Leslie Sarony sings his own song "Don't Do That to the Poor Puss Cat"; "Dearest Love" is sung for us by the inimitable Noel Coward.

The quality of the transfers is clean and neat. We are only some- times made aware of the original surface noises, but there seems to be no loss in either end of the sound spectrum. The record is almost over before you realize that old friends are about to depart. I tended, in my first few hearings, to continue flipping the disc over and starting afresh. I've stopped that now, but I do go back to it for the fun of

hearing Layton & Johnstone duet on "Me & My Shadow" or The Rhythmic Eight perform "I Can't Give You Anything But Love", and an eclectic vocal by Maurice Elwin, in a style which should have made Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh very proud.

Now I want to see the series. I can't wait! And that's British nostalgia for you.

J. Peter Bergman