

RUST ON DISCOGRAPHY

Brian Rust's Guide to Discography. Greenwood Press, 1980. \$19.95. 133 pages.

Brian Rust's fame in discographical circles is two-fold. He has managed to write the "only available" book on several rather broad subjects--the only available book length discography of American dance bands, the only one on British dance bands, the only one on vaudeville artists, the only one on historical spoken word recordings. And he has approached each with commendable thoroughness. He pioneered many conventions and procedures which have been widely adopted by discographers in all fields of music, and his magnum opus, Jazz Records (now in its fourth edition), is the model of discographical organization.

Rust is today probably the best known discographer in the world.

Before looking at this latest, and rather unusual book (still another "only one available" on its subject), I would like to sketch something about the remarkable man who has produced such a long and varied list of discographies.

He lives in Hatch End, England (whence his friends have dubbed him "The Sage of Hatch End"). Rust was once a BBC record librarian, but he now devotes all of his time to discography. Needless to say, this has not made him wealthy. He was born in London in 1922, and began collecting jazz 78's as a young man. By the late 1940's he was researching and writing about jazz-related subjects. Two early articles on Fletcher Henderson and Jelly Roll Morton appeared in Jazz Journal in 1949, and his first book, a "bio-discography" of King Oliver, written with the late Walter C. Allen, was published in 1955. Another collaboration, Recorded Jazz: A Critical Guide (1958), with Rex Harris, was picked up by a major publisher and appeared in the U.S. in a paperback edition.

Rust's interests were not limited to jazz. While working for the BBC he compiled a directory to early British theatre recordings, titled London Musical Shows on Records, 1894-1954 (1958). This was mimeographed in a limited edition of 200 copies, distributed to a few aficionados, and then disappeared almost completely--a fate which overtakes all too many useful scholarly studies. (Fortunately Rust salvaged this one as the basis for a much expanded book which appeared in the late 1970's.) Also during the 1950's Rust had a brief career as a performing musician, as leader and drummer of something called "The Original Barnstormers Spasm Band." Britain was enjoying a revival of old-style "traditional" jazz at the time, and Rust's group was invited to make a few commercial recordings for English Parlophone and Decca in 1958-1959. Perhaps these will be listed in someone's discography one day--they certainly are rare!

Rust's principal interest remained early jazz, however, and his goal was a single, definitive directory and information source on all jazz records of the pre-World War II period.

He was not the first to attempt this. Directories of various kinds had been published as far back as 1936, when Frenchman Charles Delauney coined the word "discography" for his first Hot Discography. Others followed, notably Orin Blackstone's Index to Jazz (1945) and the Carey-McCarthy-Venables Jazz Directory (1948), but all of them had serious problems. For one thing they attempted to list all jazz recordings released up to the year of publication, which inevitably made them out of date as soon as they appeared. It also forced the authors to spend an inordinate amount of time keeping up with and documenting the flood of contemporary recordings, which came out even as they worked. The results were unwieldy, to say the least. Jazz Directory, which was supposed to appear in a series of alphabetical volumes, took nine years to cover artists up to the letter "L", and then gave up the ghost. Not only were "M" through "Z" never covered, but cut-off dates for the volumes that did appear varied from 1948 (for A-B) to 1957 (for K-L).

From the start Rust adopted a simple principle which has become basic for subsequent discographers, both jazz and general. He picked a given span of years, with a fixed cut-off date, and concentrated on the best possible scholarship within that span. Freed from the necessity of keeping up with the constantly changing current scene, he and his circle of helpers developed new and ingenious sources of information on their chosen era. In addition to the catalogs, files and recording ledgers of the record companies, these included interviews with musicians and study of their personal files and log books (one famous band contractor of the 1920's kept a detailed payment record which revealed which musicians took part in many recording sessions). Even the day-to-day itineraries of bands were reconstructed, to identify when they could have been in a given city to make a certain recording. All of this may sound obvious in the abstract, but it required an enormous amount of time and coordination of efforts, and represented a quantum leap from the simple "list of records" which had been the standard of discography before Rust.

Incidentally, history is currently repeating itself in another field of music. The young field of rock discography, having yet to find its Rust, is energetically compiling simple lists of released records while the files and source materials it will someday need for proper documentation are gradually disappearing. With only a handful of exceptions, the work now being published in the rock field will probably have to be wholly re-done, in years to come. This is despite the fact that rock discographies generally receive far wider distribution than those on pre-microgroove recordings, and should be able to afford a higher level of completeness. Rust in the Guide expresses amazement when one of his early volumes (The Victor Master Book) sold 1500 copies. A recent, badly garbled discography of the Beatles (All Together Now) sold 30,000 copies!

The first edition of Rust's major work, Jazz Records, came out in 1961, in looseleaf format, covering 1897-1931. Two years later, much enlarged, it appeared in hard cover, published by the author himself.

A companion volume followed for 1932-1942. The two volumes quickly became standard in the field, and just as quickly went out of print, for such are the costs of publication that an author forced to publish his own work cannot afford to gamble on more than what he knows will sell reasonably quickly. I can remember buying my first copy of Jazz Records--which I had heard about through word of mouth--second hand at twice the original list price, and considering it a bargain. They just weren't available anymore.

The late 1960's and early 1970's were difficult years for Brian Rust. Injured in two serious accidents, and with failing eyesight, he labored on revisions and expansion of his Jazz Records as well as on other projects. In 1969 his labors began to bear fruit, with both a new, larger edition of Jazz Records (1,968 pages) and The Victor Master Book, Volume Two.

The Master Book introduced Rust to a new and larger world of record collectors, beyond the jazz enthusiasts. It was essentially a fully indexed listing of every Victor recording session held in the U.S. between the years 1925 and 1936 (except for classical and foreign-language recordings), complete with dates, matrix numbers, indication of what was issued and not issued, personnel and catalog numbers of the issued recordings. It was a boon to popular, country and blues and gospel enthusiasts, as well as the jazz collector.

There never was a "first" volume of The Victor Master Book. As Rust became immersed in other projects, the Victor project reverted to Ted Fagan and Bill Moran in the U.S., who had been working on it for years. They will soon publish the definitive directory to every recording session ever held by Victor and its predecessors, popular and classical, from 1900-on.

A major breakthrough for Rust--and for the field of discography--came in 1973, when a commercial American publishing house agreed to put out his latest work, The Complete Entertainment Discography (written with Allen Debus and covering the recordings of stage and screen stars). Previously all of Rust's books were published by himself or by the English jazz magazine, Storyville--always, of course, in very small editions. A "pure" discography printed and distributed by a commercial publisher (Arlington House, which is allied with the mail order Nostalgia Book Club) represented an important turning point, allowing a far wider audience to be reached. All of Rust's subsequent books have found "real" publishers, either in the U.S. or England, and the precedent has benefited other serious discographers as well.

The 1970's saw a small flood of books by Rust, based on his accumulated research of 30 years. Following Jazz Records and The Victor Master Book in 1969 came The Dance Bands, a narrative book published in England in 1972 (and by Arlington House in the U.S. in 1974): British Dance Bands: 1912-1939, written with Edward Walker (1973); The Complete Entertainment Discography (1973); the 2066-page American Dance Band Discography (1975); London Musical Shows on Record: 1897-1976, with Rex

Bunnett (1977); Discography of Historical Records on Cylinders and 78's (1978), covering spoken word recordings; a new and even larger edition of Jazz Records (1978); The American Record Label Book (1978); and British Music Hall on Record (1979).

Not all of these books have excited universal acclaim. General discographies can never be truly complete (despite the publisher-imposed title of the Complete Entertainment Discography). In fact, corrections and additions to the 1975 American Dance Band Discography have been running ever since as a regular column in Record Research magazine. Nevertheless, errors were usually of omission rather than commission, and were remarkably few for such massive works. With the publication of the spoken word and record labels books, however, more widespread errors began to creep in, due apparently to the author's failure to follow current research as published in various journals in the field. Some of these unfortunate errors have carried over into the Guide to Discography (more on that later). Hopefully, collaborative efforts will reduce this problem in the future. In fact, Rust's current projects include a Columbia Master Book, in collaboration with this reviewer and William Bryant.

Brian Rust's Guide to Discography is a compilation of diverse information about the field of discography, all neatly assembled in one place. It does not propose any new directions, nor is it likely to provide any dramatic insights for experienced discographers. It is somewhat akin to a long, rambling discussion about the art and science of discography. However the person doing the discussing is extraordinarily knowledgeable, and almost any discographer, budding neophyte or seasoned veteran, is likely to find some information of interest.

The book opens with a discussion of the purpose and function of discography, including some anecdotes about Rust's own experiences researching the proper historical records to use in such British television productions as "Upstairs, Downstairs." Chapter two is "A Short History of the Science of Discography," covering high points in the field since operatic collectors began publishing retrospective lists of the recordings of their favorite artists, in The Gramophone, ca. 1930. (Does anyone know of earlier attempts to publish retrospective lists, as opposed to summaries of currently available recordings?) Rust modestly gives credit to Walter C. Allen for pioneering modern standards of discographical completeness.

Chapter three, "The Creation of a Discography," is the heart of the book, touching on many potential sources of information for the discographer. Sometimes the author is frustratingly vague, especially for the beginner. Locate samples of the manufacturer's original catalogs and supplements, he says (where?); search the contemporary trade press, such as Talking Machine World or The Gramophone (neither is likely to be found in your local library); consult the record companies' own original ledgers (how? Most companies won't let you in the door!). Such companies as RCA and Columbia may have welcomed Brian Rust with

open arms, but they are not likely to do so to every aspiring discographer who wanders in off the street--or writes them a letter. Some U.S. companies, including such majors as Decca/MCA and Capitol, have been notoriously uncooperative to even the most established, serious researchers. Perhaps because of his own experience, largely with the more civil British companies, Rust seems a bit ingenuous as to the difficulties others are going to have in this regard.

Even though the reader is not going to find much on the location and accessibility of original sources, he will probably get some good general ideas from this chapter.

Chapter four attempts to describe the principal types of discographies, but suffers (as does much of the book) from the rambling narrative. Pages 51-56, a little further on, reproduce sample pages from actual discographies, which seems a superior way in which to point out the differences in approach and format used by different authors.

The rest of the Guide consists of lists--of record labels, of published discographies, or magazines and organizations dealing with discographical subjects, of terms used in the field (have you ever heard of the "Buchmann-Meyer Effect"?). Though these sections have their individual shortcomings, they provide a welcome starting point for the reader anxious to move from the general to the specific.

The chapter on labels is perhaps the weakest, perpetuating some of the unfortunate errors found in The American Record Label Book.

Item: Columbia began recording in 1889, not 1891, a rather significant difference as it marks the year of birth of the commercial recording industry. This was documented rather thoroughly in an article by this reviewer, in The ARSC Journal, Volume X, No. 1 (1978). Edison began making musical records for sale in the same year (1889), not "the early 1890's".

Item: The relationship of the Globe Record Co. and the early Climax label (the first Columbia discs) is substantially incorrect. Globe was not founded by Eldridge Johnson, rather he took it over from Columbia for a brief period; its products did not all have a "VTM" in the wax; nor are all issues identical to Columbia.

Item: Edison Blue Amberol cylinders were not all dubbed from discs. As a matter of fact, discs, not the new cylinders, were originally the secondary product. The early, "live" Blue Amberols (made from 1912-1914) are perhaps the highest quality cylinder recordings ever issued.

Item: Brunswick was launched in the U.S. in 1920, amid a great barrage of publicity. It is misleading, at best, to date the label as 1916--without specifying that this refers to the unconfirmed first appearance of an obscure Canadian predecessor label.

Item: Johnny Mercer was not "the" founder of Capitol, he was one of three men who founded the label. Neither Capitol nor the MGM label have ever been a force in the classical music field.

Item: To call Bill Haley "the rock 'n' roll protagonist who is credited with launching the craze in 1956" is certainly quaint, but far from true. But then, this is well past the author's period of interest. In fact, Rust cannot even bring himself to contemplate how discography will adapt to the realities of contemporary recording (page 14). That has been left for someone else's book.

All of this is not to say that the labels section is without value. It contains a great deal of good and useful information. It is simply a shame that it must be marred by so many substantive errors which have already been corrected elsewhere, in research journals which should be familiar to any writer in the field.

Chapter seven is an annotated listing of book length discographies. This summarizes neatly the contents of each work, though it is quite undiscriminating as to quality. Rust is unfailingly polite to everyone. The effusive compliments showered on one and all become, at times, rather amusing:

- David Jasen's Recorded Ragtime: "An absolute sine qua non for ragtime ... an all embracing reference book ... beyond reproach."

- Ray Wile's Edison Diamond Discs: "must take a place in the library of any seat of learning ..."

- John Flower's Moonlight Serenade: A Bio-Discography of the Glenn Miller Civilian Band: "a discographical masterpiece."

- Michel Ruppli's Atlantic Records, and its companion volumes on Prestige and Savoy: "must be regarded as absolute monuments of discographical literature. It would take a bold, omniscient genius to be able to fault them."

Now, really!

A section on discographical magazines includes virtually all of the principal non-rock publications (including the ARSC Journal). Nowhere does Rust deal with rock discography.

In all, Brian Rust has made a useful and interesting contribution to discography with this volume, by assembling between two covers a general overview of the field. Despite a few rough edges, it can be recommended as an introductory work for newcomers, and interesting reading for more experienced hands. And it is, of course, the "only one available".

Note: An earlier version of this reviewer's biographical sketch of Brian Rust appeared in Antique Phonograph Monthly in 1976. For more

detailed information on the history of discography, the reader is referred to an excellent article by Paul B. Sheatsley in Record Research, No. 58 (February 1964).

Tim Brooks