

Rainer E. Lotz, German Ragtime & Prehistory Of Jazz. Storyville Publications and Co. Ltd., 66 Fairview Drive, Chigwell, Essex IG7 6HS, England, 1985. xxxvi + 372 pp., (hardcover) ISBN 0 902391 08 9

What is one to do when one loves ragtime? What is one to do when one loves recordings? What is one to do when one loves ragtime recordings and is asked to review a book which is supposed to be a discography, which is entitled German Ragtime & Prehistory of Jazz, but which contains very little information on the recordings of ragtime? Perhaps the title should have been "The Wandering Minstrels of Germany," for the author has a problem in deciding just what it is he wants to do. He tells us in his long introduction that the work is intended to be a companion volume to Horst H. Lange's 3rd edition of Die deutsche 78er-Discographie der Hot Dance-und-Jazz-Musik 1903-1958, but then goes on to wander all over the sound spectrum to include cylinders, music boxes of both cylinder and flat discs, hurdy-gurdys, piano rolls and even films. Isn't this a bit much to ask of a discography? Just what kind of an audience does the author wish to have? For instance, this review is appearing in a publication whose readers are interested in sound recordings and presumably collect them. But do these same readers want to know about sound on film, sound on paper, sound on metal?

One of the major faults with a book entitled German Ragtime and Prehistory of Jazz is that there are too many confusing points thrown at the reader all at once. German ragtime? There isn't any. The author and publisher meant German recordings of ragtime and should have said so. Prehistory of Jazz? Is this red herring offered as a justification by a publisher who is known to produce a jazz magazine and books on jazz although this volume has plainly nothing to do with jazz? Lotz himself seems confused: he starts his introduction to the background of the music with an American musical troupe entertaining in London, England in 1837, and draws the conclusion that "the prehistory of jazz has a long tradition in Europe in regard to the instrumental music, singing, dancing, theatrical performances and combinations thereof." Is the history of American entertainment now to be thought of as the prehistory of jazz? Why such an awkward supposition and title? It is terribly misleading to have a title seeking to attract two different audiences at the same time. If we are going to examine historically the entire American entertainment industry in order to begin the work with ragtime activities in England, Europe and especially Germany, why invoke the name of jazz, even negatively, in its title?

The author continues to be confused and to confuse the reader with his large vision by abruptly announcing that although he will be delving into the widest variety of sound materials, he will be limiting his subject to those works or performances which were thought or felt to be Afro-American at the time (the

author's emphasis). Why the premium on being Afro-American? Is the prehistory of jazz or the history of ragtime itself to be considered as an exclusively Afro-American expression? Surely this cannot be when the most popular recorded rags of the day were composed by whites ("Temptation Rag," "Black and White Rag," "Grizzly Bear Rag").

It is curious that the author then continues in his merry, broad-based way by ringing in such musical composition as Indian songs, marches, songs by Stephen Foster, so-called ragtime songs (was "Alexander's Ragtime Band" written by an Afro-American?), Tin Pan Alley songs, non-ragtime performances by black artists, classical compositions by black composers, folk and gospel songs, adaptations by European classical composers, and minstrel and blackface comedy recordings, including coon songs. This might be all to the good except that Lotz decides not to be inclusive but merely selective. A specialized book is supposed to be as thorough as possible within the defined subject, rather than a smattering of diverse media. However, Lotz doesn't even attempt to define ragtime. So, lovers of ragtime, prepare to be disappointed; most of this book is taken up with music and performances devoted to non-rags.

One of the troubles I always have with national discographies is that the compilers ring in recordings originally made elsewhere and merely manufactured in the country discussed. This book is no exception.

This work abounds in inconsistencies. The author begins by declaring the discography to contain mostly Afro-American music, but he then proceeds to post-World War I Novelty ragtime (his example: "Kitten on the Keys") which was the almost exclusive province of white composers and performers. Not that I'm unhappy that he chose to include the category of Novelty ragtime, I only wish he would have been more thorough in detailing the recordings of it. Since this was the time period (1920's) when the greatest number of rags were being recorded, I should have expected detailed and more complete information about them than appears here. Company catalogs are plentiful and must have been available to the author.

Musical box and cylinder lovers will be delighted with the author's listings of German manufacturers prior to the first world war. But then Lotz goes on to list all German companies which produced or distributed films prior to World War I, German makes and makers of orchestrions, organettes, organs or harmoniums, reproducing pianos, non-reproducing pianos, photoplayers, violins, and mechanical zithers. These listings, which have nothing to do with sound recordings, take up space and tend to overwhelm the reader without adding to his understanding; they do not belong in a discography.

The discography, when we can finally get to it (the discursive introduction covers thirty-six pages), contains interesting and accurate information about the artists,

recordings and even contemporary reviews. This information, as well as its format, follows the standard set by Brian Rust. The typography is up to the fine standard set by the publisher and the binding holds up well.

If only the author and publisher had exercised restraint, or what librarians call "delimitations," this book would have greater use and value. But its ramblings and inconsistencies make these 407 pages a disappointment for the record collector. For the ragtime lover, there is not enough pertinent material here to recommend the expenditure of the price of this volume. Since the author spent many years and gathered much material for this project, perhaps we would have been better served, and a different review would have been given, if the volume were entitled "German Sound Documents to 1917".

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