

***Trumpet Records: an illustrated history with discography.***

*By Marc Ryan. Milford, NH: Big Nickel Publications, 1992. 114 pp., bibliography, discography, photos, index.*

This entertaining and instructive story covers the birth and demise of a Jackson, Mississippi record label from 1951 through 1956. It also pays homage to the remarkable Lillian Shedd McMurry, a Jackson native who fell in love with the blues and gospel she encountered, both locally and on records by Tampa Red, Arthur Crudup, Washboard Sam and others, which she sold through a North Farish Street retail outlet beginning in 1949. By spring in the following year, she had launched her own Trumpet label as a means of exploiting local talent.

I use "exploiting" in the positive sense of the word, since the author describes in detail the ways in which Ms. McMurry went out of her way to be supportive of Trumpet artists, advancing royalties to them, in getting them out of occasional personal and legal scrapes, and in personal exchanges which revealed the depth of her commitment to the music she was recording and to the people who made it.

However, McMurry could be resolute when the occasion called for it. Ryan describes a couple of telling incidents; one involved a surreptitious visit to the area by Joe and Jules Bihari, whose west coast Modern and RPM labels were an important factor in the burgeoning r&b market of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Trumpet's early successes by Sonny Boy Williamson and Elmore James apparently aroused the Biharis' competitive instincts and brought them to Mississippi to sign up and record local talent, regardless of any pre-existing contractual obligations the artists might have had.

After recording Elmore James in a Greenville club (with their Magnecorder hooked up to the p.a. system!), they returned to record some "tests" by Trumpet artists Sonny Boy Williamson and Willie Love. Lonnie Holmes' band was preparing to record when McMurry, an attorney and a local high sheriff strolled in to serve a restraining order. Love and Williamson were artists whose previous sales justified forgiveness after a discussion concerning loyalties, but Holmes was denied any further opportunity to make records. A successful lawsuit brought only a small damage award from the Biharis, who managed to release their Elmore James material afterwards.

Another incident in 1951 involved a three-evening session scheduled to be held at a Jackson musicians' union hall, rented to Trumpet by officials apparently unaware of the label's racially mixed talent roster. During the first evening, these white officials proceeded to insult and menace the black musicians. As the situation deteriorated, McMurry called for everyone to pull out, while arranging for the recording to continue in another vacant hall. Salvaging her own dignity and that of her musical colleagues in such a situation can't have been easy in that era of Mississippi's rigidly enforced racial segregation patterns which preceded the 1960s; it surely called for an iron will and deep integrity, qualities which Lillian McMurry apparently has in some abundance.

A further stranger anecdote, which I guess couldn't be told in greater detail, concerns Eldridge R. Johnson III, great grandson of *the* Eldridge R. Johnson, and a 1971 purchase of Trumpet session tapes for intended release. Instead the tapes were stolen and ransomed back to him on several occasions and were ultimately dug out of a basement and sold to author Ryan, who plans to issue them himself.

These, and stories of unpaid bills, unscrupulous rivals, unreliable artists and other problems give a good idea how precarious things could be for a small record company, then and now. One reason for special interest in Trumpet today is the very high quality of its best recordings, especially those of Sonny Boy Williamson (Aleck Miller), whose voice and harmonica gained him an international reputation before his death in 1965. Even the truant Elmore James (d. 1963) is best remembered for “Dust my broom,” the single side he made for Trumpet in 1951. Bluesmen Willie Love and Luther Huff, the Hodges Brothers’ semi-grass band, and the Southern Sons gospel group were other standouts whose work combined to make the label – and its fascinating story – of continuing interest.

Marc Ryan has told the story well, unless you feel that his obvious affection for Lillian McMurry and her work gives a bias. Those, like me, who’ve heard the records probably won’t feel that way. I do fault the author for a flawed general grasp of recorded sound history: he has Polk Miller recording for Victor instead of Edison, Lucille Bogan’s ARC records appearing in 1928 instead of 1933, the Paramount company expiring in 1934 instead of 1932, the year of Speckled Red’s “Dirty dozens” as 1928 instead of 1929, and he describes western swing incorrectly and ungraciously as “a bastardized version of hillbilly music.”

These minor flaws don’t really detract from a good and otherwise thoroughly researched effort, which is enhanced by a painstaking discography and many good photos and graphics. And, as you might gather, the Trumpet/McMurry story itself is well told and of exceptional interest. *Reviewed by Dick Spottswood*

### ***Polka happiness.***

*By Charles Keil, Angeliki V. Keil and Dick Blau. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992. 221 pp., notes, photos, name index, selected discography.*

Although recommending this book, I must acknowledge that some of my own work was drawn upon during its preparation, especially in a discussion of early recordings during the first chapter. I also had the pleasure of reviewing an earlier manuscript of this work several years ago and provided what I hoped were some useful criticisms and suggestions. One normally shouldn’t try to evaluate a work without greater distance from it than I can claim – but I do feel that it needs to be brought to wider attention, so I’ll try to be prepared for any conflict of interest charges that get tossed at me!

*Polka happiness* approaches the topic from within the tightly knit world of polka, with interviews, observations and discussions involving musicians, fans and event organizers. The title specifies the primary element polka is expected to provide to polka lovers, and the book’s many photos of smiling, perspiring participants eloquently underlines the theme.

But it would be misleading to say that it’s only about feeling good, though the authors treat the topic with thoughtfulness. There’s also a discussion of polka’s origins and development, its place in the broader spectrum of American ethnic music, and what polka means to the lives of musicians and others who derive at least a partial livelihood from it via radio, record production and retailing and connected promotional activities, and to the fans, whose support and enthusiasm is a requisite. Those who work in any area of music with limited public appeal will find much to empathize with in accounts of the meaning of polka music, polka dancing and polka ambience to the faithful, jokes and other disparagements from outsiders, shrinking numbers of follow-