

Book Reviews

***Jimmy Durante: His Show Business Career,
With an Annotated Filmography and Discography.***

By David Bakish. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995. 291 pp. ISBN: 0-89950-968-1. \$29.95.

History has not been terribly kind to entertainer Jimmy Durante (1893-1980). It is not so much that he has been criticized, but worse, ignored. This is particularly true of his recordings. Of more than 9,000 articles on recording history and recording artists cited by this Journal's "Current Bibliography" column since 1979, only one was about Durante, and that was published 15 years ago.

David Bakish, an English professor at the City University of New York, has set out to put the spotlight back on the little man with the mangled grammar, and the twinkle in his eye, who was by all accounts one of the kindest, most considerate stars in show business. He certainly had a remarkable career. Born of lower-middle-class Italian immigrant parents on New York's Lower East Side, he hustled for jobs as a child, and by the time he was 15 was playing ragtime piano at neighborhood parties and clubs. Before long he took his talents to the hurly burly of Coney Island, where he became known as "Ragtime Jimmy". This eventually led to his first recordings for Okeh, with his own "Original New Orleans Jazz Band," in late 1918.

Durante had a surprisingly active recording career from 1918-1921, as a pianist with his own band, Lanin's Southern Serenaders, Ladd's Black Aces and Bailey's Lucky Seven, on a variety of smaller labels (Gennett, Arto, Emerson, Paramount, Pathé). These are carefully detailed in a comprehensive discography at the back of the book. He also wrote songs, perhaps the best known (at the time, at least) being "I've Got My Habits On," which was recorded by several bands and vocalists.

His career then moved in other directions. First during the 1920s came night club work, as part of a music and comedy trio with his partners Lou Clayton and Eddie Jackson. For a time he operated his own dive, the Club Durant. By the end of the decade Clayton, Jackson & Durante had made it into big time vaudeville, headlining at the Palace in 1928. The trio made their one and only recording together for Columbia in 1929 ("Can Broadway Do Without Me?" and "So I Ups to Him," two of Jimmy's trademark numbers). In the 1930s Durante increasingly worked as a solo (though he never forgot, or failed to find work for, his erstwhile partners), on Broadway, in films, and on radio. Probably the height of his career came in the 1940s when he co-starred with

young comic Garry Moore in a long-running CBS network show. Jimmy's persona never changed, the glib street guy, full of energy, "moirdering" the language, interrupting his songs with bits of patter ("I gotta million of 'em!"). It was not far from the real Jimmy, either. He was a natural, and audiences loved him for it.

With his comic appearance and patented gravely speech, Durante was more a character "type" than an actor or joke-teller, and he easily made the transition to the visual medium of television in the 1950s. From 1950-1956 he hosted a succession of big budget variety shows (*All Star Revue*, *Colgate Comedy Hour*, *The Jimmy Durante Show*), and was later seen on numerous specials and in guest appearances with the royalty of show business. Not that he was overly impressed with celebrity, his or anybody else's. Once, introduced to the eminent music critic Deems Taylor, he blurted out, "whose tailor?"

He continued to tour and appear regularly until he was felled by a massive stroke in 1972, spending his last years in poor health.

Throughout Jimmy's movie, radio and television career from the 1930s to the 1960s he continued to make occasional recordings, usually novelty songs or specialty material from his act (e.g., "It's My Nose's Birthday," "G'wan Home, Your Mudder's Callin'"). Late in his career he increasingly turned to sentimental numbers, such as "September Song." All of these are fully detailed in the 23-page discography, compiled with the assistance of well known discographers Brian Rust and Mark Berresford.

Bakish provides admirable detail on all aspects of Durante's career, with full annotation of sources. Occasionally he does wander off the topic, as in a long tirade about the alleged shortcomings of the Hollywood studios in the 1930s, and a lengthy critique of early radio programming (it is three-and-a-half pages into the chapter on radio before Durante is even mentioned). Providing background information is fine, but the book sometimes seems to turn into a vehicle for the author's strongly held opinions about a great many subjects.

We'll forgive him that, however, because ultimately the Durante story is all here, reasonably well written and in more detail than you will find anywhere else. Besides the discography, there are appendixes listing feature films, Broadway plays, radio appearances, television appearances, and songs written by Durante, and a chronology of his life. Needless to say, you will also find out the identity of Mrs. Calabash, referred to in Jimmy's famous closing, "Goodnight Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are". (Duranter gave many versions of the origin of the name over the years; the author does his best to sort out the truth.)

Whether you are interested primarily in Durante, or in the larger subject of show business from the 1910s to the 1960s, should be an rewarding read. *Reviewed by Tim Brooks.*

Preserving Library Materials: A Manual

By Susan G. Swartzburg. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1995. 504 pp., cloth. ISBN 0-8108-2855-3

To the novice or general librarian, the world of library and archival preservation can be daunting. *Preserving Library Materials: A Manual* provides an extremely readable introduction to, and overview of, this world that is also compelling. The purpose of the book is not to tell librarians how to establish their preservation programs but rather to provide "practical advice and guiding principles to help librarians and