

HISTORISCHE AUFNAHMEN

by

Leslie Gerber

Columbia has presented us with a most curious collection, entitled A Jazz Piano Anthology (KG 32355, two records). The recordings, by 31 different pianists, must cover a time span of close to fifty years, yet there is not the slightest clue as to when any of them were made. In fact, Columbia has not provided a single scrap of discographic information--no dates, matrix numbers, record numbers, not even accompanying personnel! Part of the explanation, undoubtedly, is that the anthology has been taken from a set produced by CBS France, where some of the information may not have been available. Still, someone went to the trouble of finding photographs of all but one of the pianists for the record jacket (and of coloring them garishly); certainly some of this energy could have been better spent in discographic research. Not until one plays the opening band of the first record does it become obvious that the selection by Eubie Blake is not, as I would have guessed, from his relatively recent two-record Columbia set, but rather an acoustic recording.

My list of complaints about this set is nearly endless. The program notes, also from France, are extremely sketchy and virtually worthless. Biographical notes are provided about the pianists, but they offer little more than birth and death dates. That for Bud Powell, for example, reads in its entirety: "He is the Charlie Parker of the piano!" Mel Powell's does not even mention his subsequent activity after leaving jazz. "Boogie Woogie Prayer" is credited only to Albert Ammons and Meade "Lux" Lewis, while Pete Johnson is also mentioned in the biographical note; all three actually appear on the record.

Even if all this printed material is seen as secondary to the recordings themselves, the complaints continue. The sound quality of the material dubbed from 78's--half the set--is extremely variable, to put it mildly. The sensational performance by Blake ("Sounds

of Africa") is rendered nearly unlistenable by atrocious processing, and the following two selections (by James P. Johnson and Fats Waller) are also troubled by heavy surface noise. Maybe these were the best copies of the records available in France, but why stick us with them? Distortion invades most of the other recordings to some extent, volume levels change, and no attempt has been made to equalize the different recordings to achieve any uniformity of sound quality. Entirely judged as a sonic production, this is the most inept job I have heard from a major label for quite some time.

Most of the selections are at least acceptable samples of the pianists involved, and I suppose the inclusion of an inferior example of Waller is probably due, at least in part, to the fact that his best piano solos were recorded for RCA. (But then, it might have been better to omit him altogether, along with Jelly Roll Morton and all the other important names who are missing.) Still, I wonder what kind of taste was involved in choosing such a trivial sample of Duke Ellington, or the ludicrous Art Tatum version of "Tiger Rag," which sounds like a speeded-up piano roll. There is also too much trivia among the modern material . . . but why go on? With all this, Columbia has still probably provided the customer with his money's worth in terms of sheer quantity at least, and there is a great deal of excellent material included, but even this generous an admission is made with great reluctance.

One most unusual item to come my way is a Czech recording of live performances by the venerated conductor, Václav Talich. The disc (Panton 01 0241 H) seems to have been published in 1970. Contents are Dvořák's The Midday Witch (with the Czech Philharmonic); Smetana's Prague Carnival Overture, and the Prelude and Liebestod from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde (both with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra). Talich made studio recordings of both Czech works (however, I don't believe the Smetana was issued on LP; I own it on a 45), but this is certainly the first recording of his Wagner to be published. The Wagner is a broad, sonorous performance, confirming the impression hinted at by Talich's few other non-Czech music recordings (of which only the Tchaikovsky Pathétique and a Mozart Violin

Concerto have ever been issued in the U.S.) that his greatness as a conductor was not limited to Czech music. The Dvořák and Smetana performances are also predictably excellent. The recordings, dating from 1953 and 1954, are surprisingly good and more than adequate for their age, and the producers have most kindly spared us the annoyance of applause. Pantone records are not easy to find; I obtained my copy from SoundsRare, P.O. Box 5650, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1N8, Canada.

The usual flow of blues reissues continues. Among the outstanding items to come my way recently, I would certainly have to include Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup: The Father of Rock and Roll (RCA LPV-573). These recordings, made between 1941 and 1954, are valuable not only for Crudup's influence (which virtually dominated Elvis Presley in his early days) but also as fine examples of early electrified blues. The first of the recordings was played on an unamplified National steel guitar, but as early as 1942 Crudup was using the amplified instruments--five years before Muddy Waters' first commercial recordings. Fascinating stuff, thoroughly annotated and excellently dubbed. A series of "twofer" issued by Fantasy includes one, Rural Blues (Fantasy 24716), made up of early-sixties Prestige/Bluesville releases by Robert Pete Williams and Snooks Eaglin. Eaglin, a superb guitarist, uses enough general material to qualify as a "songster" rather than a bluesman, but most of these numbers are blues; he is an entertaining and musical but relatively superficial performer, at least to my ears. Williams, though, is something else--perhaps the most primitive bluesman to be recorded in the past thirty years. The amateurish recording quality combines with Williams' slurred diction to make much of his text incomprehensible--a shame, because he is obviously capable of great poetry and force in his improvised lyrics--but the completely individualistic style of his guitar playing is worth hearing for itself. I think Williams has produced some of the most beautiful blues music on records, although others may be repelled by his crude directness.

Another Fantasy "twofer" (24715) features 34 items by Huddie Ledbetter ("Leadbelly") from Musicraft, Asch and Disc 78's, originally recorded from 1939 to 1944.

I don't think these are Leadbelly's most important recordings, but almost anything of his is worth having. I'm not too happy with Fantasy's dubbings which have too much surface noise, but better than filtered fake stereo; and the price is attractive. Two more Leadbelly releases are not reissues at all but entirely new material; apparently both were wire recordings from the collection of Frederic Ramsey, Jr. Shout On (Folkways FT 31030 S) consists of material from four of Henrietta Yurchenco's WNYC-FM radio programs, recorded in 1948. One of the four programs came through with some extraneous noise, but it is no worse than 78 surface noise and in all cases the sound quality is remarkably clear (although Folkways has given no help with stereo rechannelling). Four of the songs here seem to be Leadbelly's only recordings, and all of the performances are excellent. Excellent also is the album entitled simply Leadbelly (Playboy PB-119), eighteen items from a concert at the University of Texas given in June, 1949, only six months before his death. Here too only a few items are new to the Leadbelly discography, but the performances are certainly worth having, and the relaxed atmosphere of the concert is palpable. I could wish Playboy had provided some program notes along with all the photographs, and the inclusion of a poster was certainly a waste of money, but at least the sound is left in mono.

One of the pianists represented on Columbia's aforementioned anthology, the late Joe Sullivan, has a new release devoted to his art (Folkways FA 2851). Although the recordings were made (by Moses Asch) from 1944 to 1946, all twelve items are first releases; three are alternate takes of issued 78's. Sullivan was never considered one of jazz's "greats," but he was a solid, dependable pianist at home in a wide variety of styles. In the version of "Begin the Beguine" which opens this LP, he runs through a whole succession of styles much in the manner of Fats Waller's "Georgia on My Mind." Eight of the records are piano solos; others include Sidney Bechet, Yank Lawson, and singer Stella Brooks. Brooks isn't very good, but Sullivan's accompaniment for her is outstanding. Sullivan, who died in 1971, obviously deserves this memorial. For some reason, Nick Perls, who does such

outstanding engineering for his own Yazoo label, has produced rather dull and slightly distorted sound on this remastering, but maybe the faults were in the original material. I suspect he may have been working from a dub rather than the original, since "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now" has a surface scratch obviously from some kind of 33 1/3 rpm disc.